

Mission Impossible: The CIA and the Cult of Covert Action in the Middle East

By the end of July the Tudeh party came out openly for Mossadeqh, the Soviet Union sent a new and hopeful ambassador to Teheran, and the Shah, his life in danger, was forced to take refuge. . . .

But we did not stop trying to retrieve the situation. I conferred daily with officials of the State and Defense departments and the Central Intelligence Agency and saw reports from our representatives on the spot who were working actively with the Shah's supporters. . . .

Throughout the crisis the United States government had done everything it possibly could to back up the Shah. Indeed, reports from observers on the spot in Teheran during the critical days sounded more like a dime novel than historical fact.

Dwight Eisenhower, recalling the successful CIA coup in Iran, 19 August 1953¹

Good morning, Mr. Phelps. The man you're looking at is King Selim III of Qamadan, a good friend of the West. Unknown to the world, the king has been imprisoned somewhere for over six months by his younger brother, Prince Samandal. With the king in his power, Samandal now controls the huge oil royalties which are Qamadan's main source of revenue. . . . Your mission, Jim, should you decide to accept it, is to rescue King Selim and restore him to his throne.

Opening scene from "The Brothers," *Mission: Impossible*, 14 December 1969²

In August 2003, I had the chance to speak with twenty-five Arab university students who had spent their summer in the United States as part of a "Young Ambassadors" program sponsored by the State Department in an attempt to foster better relations between America and the Muslim world. After laying out the historical context for the clash of cultures that culminated in the terrorist

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, NY, 1963), 163-64.

2. Patrick J. White, *The Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier* (New York, 1991), 247-48.

attacks of 11 September 2001, I was stunned to hear several of my listeners insist that the destruction of the World Trade Center had been part of an elaborate CIA plot. Just as I was about to dismiss this as the worst sort of paranoid clap-trap popularized by the lunatic fringe, one of the Arabs asked me whether I had ever heard of Mohammed Mossadegh, the Iranian nationalist whom the agency had overthrown almost exactly fifty years earlier. Only then did I truly appreciate what a long shadow the CIA has cast across the Middle East.³

Indeed, few aspects of U.S. foreign policy since 1945 have been more controversial than the activities of the CIA, which at one time or another has shaped events in almost every Middle Eastern country. Throughout the Cold War, the agency bribed government officials, tapped phones, and pilfered documents from Tehran to Tripoli to secure the best possible information about the political and military intentions of the Soviet Union and its friends and clients in the Muslim world. Gathering intelligence, however, was only part of the CIA's mission. Confronted by what many Americans interpreted as Soviet-inspired upheavals in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, the agency has resorted to covert action from Cuba and Guatemala to Indonesia and Iran. During the six decades after the Second World War, the CIA waged what amounted to undeclared political warfare abroad, working to prevent Soviet subversion and promote American interests while always making sure that the ensuing rigged election or military coup d'état was plausibly deniable and never traceable directly to the United States. Over the years, however, many of the CIA's covert exploits would become open secrets, routinely rationalized in Washington as Cold War necessities, bitterly resented in Muslim capitals as naked imperialism, and frequently glamorized in the media as "mission impossible."

One of America's earliest and most celebrated covert actions had come in Iran during the summer of 1953, when CIA agents planned and executed a military coup that toppled Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, an aging nationalist infamous for his theatrical anti-Western tirades. In a series of stunning moves beginning in late 1951, Mossadegh expropriated Britain's quarter-billion-dollar petroleum concession, flirted with the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, and reduced the pro-American shah, Reza Mohammad Pahlavi, to a mere figurehead. Unwilling to relinquish their control of Iranian oil without a fight, the British prepared to send in troops during the autumn of 1951. The Truman administration, however, favored a more subtle approach and persuaded Whitehall to rely on economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to counteract Mossadegh's nationalist policies.⁴ By November 1952, CIA officials and their

3. For recent discussions of the legacy of the CIA's clandestine activities in Iran during the 1950s, see Mostafa T. Zahrani, "The Coup That Changed the Middle East: Mossadeq v. the CIA in Retrospect," *World Policy Journal* (Summer 2002): 93–99, and "Revisiting Cold War Coups and Finding Them Costly," *New York Times*, 30 November 2003.

4. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (New York, 1984), 632–689; Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953

counterparts in the MI6, Britain's chief foreign intelligence agency, were planning a military coup d'état to depose Mossadegh and install a pro-Western regime more to the liking of the shah. CIA director Walter Bedell Smith was intrigued by the proposal, but others in the lame-duck Truman administration tabled it. Then, just a few days before Dwight Eisenhower moved into the Oval Office, Smith called in the agency's chief Middle Eastern expert and thundered: "When is our goddam operation going to get underway?"⁵

Kermit Roosevelt, the recipient of Bedell Smith's profane query, became the driving force behind Operation Ajax, the code name for the CIA's covert plan to overthrow Mossadegh. A grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, Kermit had served with U.S. intelligence during the Second World War in Egypt, Palestine, and Iran. Working closely during the spring of 1953 with Allen W. Dulles, another old Middle East hand whom Ike had just appointed to succeed Bedell Smith as CIA director, Kermit Roosevelt incorporated elements of the scheme he had previously discussed with the MI6 into a unilateral American covert action. In the words of a CIA in-house history completed shortly afterward, Operation Ajax was supposed "to cause the fall of the Mossadeq government" and replace it with a military regime "which would reach an equitable oil settlement, enabling Iran to become economically sound and financially solvent, and which would vigorously prosecute the dangerously strong Communist party."⁶ Roosevelt spelled out the details on 25 June during a top secret meeting chaired by Allen's brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, whose first response was: "So this is how we get rid of that madman Mossadegh." After a brief discussion, the Dulles brothers approved Operation Ajax, which "was cleared directly with the President" on 11 July.⁷

Kermit Roosevelt arrived in Tehran two weeks later, established contact with a band of anti-Mossadegh conspirators organized by the local CIA station, and put the finishing touches on the plan during a pair of late night meetings at the imperial palace. The shah was to issue a royal decree replacing Prime Minister

Coup d'Etat in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (Summer 1987): 261–66; Kermit Roosevelt, *Counter coup: The Struggle for Control of Iran* (New York, 1979), 78–81, 107–08.

5. Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 50–51, 69–72; Mark Hamilton Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian-American Alliance, 1941–1953* (New York, 1987), 109–12. Bedell Smith is quoted in Roosevelt, *Counter coup*, 115.

6. On Kermit Roosevelt's background, see Burton Hersh, *The Old Boys: The American Elite and the Origins of the CIA* (New York, 1992), 331–32, and Roosevelt, *Counter coup*, 23, 36–37, 39–41. For the postmortem on Operation Ajax, see CIA Clandestine Service History, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952–August 1953" (March 1954), posted on <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/iran-cia-intro.pdf>. A summary of this document may be found in "Secrets of History: The CIA in Iran—A Special Report," *New York Times*, 16 April 2000.

7. On the 25 June 1953 meeting, see Roosevelt, *Counter coup*, 1–19. (The Foster Dulles quote in on p. 8.) On Ike's role in the decision, see CIA Clandestine Service History, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952–August 1953," and Foster Dulles to Allen Dulles, telcon 24 July 1953, both in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951–54*, 10: 737–38 (hereafter *FRUS*, for the appropriate year and volume).

Mossadegh with a right-wing general, Fazlollah Zahedi, while the CIA dispensed several hundred thousand dollars to organize mass demonstrations supporting the change. Despite Roosevelt's careful planning, however, Operation Ajax nearly fell apart on 13 August after Mossadegh refused to honor the royal decree and instead issued a warrant for Zahedi's arrest. While the shah panicked and fled to Rome for an unscheduled "vacation," the CIA mobilized pro-Western elements in the Iranian army who deposed Mossadegh and jailed hundreds of his supporters on 19 August 1953. Once General Zahedi was safely installed as prime minister, the shah flew back to Tehran, where he offered a midnight toast to Kermit Roosevelt: "I owe my throne to God, my people, my army—and to you."⁸ After returning to Washington, Roosevelt paid a call at the White House, where on 4 September Dwight Eisenhower secretly presented him with the National Security Medal while John Foster Dulles looked on, "purring like a giant cat."⁹

Relieved by Roosevelt's last-minute heroics in Tehran, the Eisenhower administration moved swiftly to ensure that the shah need never again utter such a toast. To this end, a CIA operative began working secretly with General Teimur Bakhtiar, a key figure in the anti-Mossadegh coup, to lay the foundation for a modern Iranian intelligence service. During the mid-1950s, Pentagon and State Department advisers helped upgrade the shah's national police force and gendarmerie, establishing mobile strike units schooled in counterinsurgency tactics. And after considerable prodding from Washington, in 1957 the shah created SAVAK, a Farsi acronym standing for the National Intelligence and Security Organization. Headed by Teimur Bakhtiar and trained by the CIA, for two decades the SAVAK relied on Gestapo tactics—arbitrary arrests, torture, and murder—and a huge network of informers to snuff out opposition to the Pahlavi dynasty. A quarter century after Operation Ajax, the shah's Iran had become an oil-rich police state, thanks in large measure to help and encouragement from U.S. intelligence.¹⁰

The implications of the CIA-backed coup that toppled Mossadegh extended far beyond Iran. Indeed, Operation Ajax was so successful that it inspired other covert actions during the Eisenhower years in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Tibet. By the 1960s, two-thirds of the agency's budget flowed into farflung clandestine

8. James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT, 1988), 86–94; Moyara de Moraes Ruehsen, "Operation 'Ajax' Revisited: Iran, 1953," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (July 1993): 473–483; Gasiorowski, "1953 Coup d'Etat in Iran," 270–79. For the shah's toast, see Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, 199.

9. Roosevelt quoted in Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: Four Who Dared; The Early Years of the CIA* (New York, 1995), 110. For a recent account of Operation Ajax that attempts to link the events of August 1953 to those of September 2001, see Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, NJ, 2003). Sadly, we may never have the full story. See "C.I.A. Destroyed Files on 1953 Iran Coup," *New York Times*, 29 May 1997.

10. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy & the Shah*, 114–21; Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, 98–99, 210–11, 402–04.

operations from South Vietnam to West Berlin and from North Korea to East Africa. Sometimes, however, those operations backfired, as when the CIA mounted an amphibious assault against Cuba's Fidel Castro that ended in disaster at the Bay of Pigs in 1961.¹¹ Although the spectacular Cuban fiasco tarnished the agency's reputation for careful planning and good judgment, earlier CIA successes like Operation Ajax had captured the imagination of an American public eager to believe that the Cold War could be won by spies and spooks without triggering nuclear armageddon. As early as 1954, Allen Dulles himself evidently leaked word of America's role in deposing Mossadegh to friendly journalists, who published a melodramatic account in the *Saturday Evening Post*.¹² By the early 1960s, Hollywood was turning best-selling novels like *The Ugly American* into star-studded films that cast clandestine American operations in Southeast Asia in a sympathetic light.¹³ Then, in 1966, *Mission: Impossible*, a television series inspired in part by the CIA's exploits, soared past other action adventures like *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* to the top of the Nielsen ratings.

Each episode of *Mission: Impossible* began with a taped message from an anonymous U.S. official who asked Jim Phelps, played by Peter Graves, to lead his small band of covert operators on a dangerous assignment in an exotic locale. Cold War themes predominated. One early episode, for example, saw the Impossible Mission Force free an Eastern European cleric, who resembled Hungary's anticommunist Cardinal Jozef Mindszenty, from a maximum security prison behind the Iron Curtain. Two seasons later, millions of Americans watched Phelps's team track down a bearded Che Guevara look-alike who, like the legendary Cuban guerrilla leader, died trying to export his revolution to other countries.¹⁴ "*Mission: Impossible* matter-of-factly offered the premise," Patrick White observed in his 1991 postmortem on the action-adventure series,

11. The two best surveys of the CIA's covert exploits are John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through Iranscam* (New York, 1986), and John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York, 1986). Both Prados and Ranelagh stress the symbolic importance of Operation Ajax. For an excellent account of the covert action in Guatemala, see Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, TX, 1982).

12. On press coverage of Operation Ajax, see Richard and Gladys Harkness, "The Mysterious Doings of the CIA," *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 November 1954, 66-68, and Gregory Trevorton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York, 1987), 73.

13. William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York, 1958). The film version of *The Ugly American* premiered in Bangkok, Thailand in March 1963, with Marlon Brando cast as the U.S. ambassador to Sarkhan, a fictional Southeast Asian nation modelled on South Vietnam. Among Brando's chief responsibilities was mounting a covert campaign against Communist guerrillas, a campaign run by a shadowy American intelligence officer who resembled Colonel Edwin Lansdale, the legendary CIA station chief in Saigon during the 1950s.

14. For these plot lines, see "Old Man Out" (October 1966) and "The Mercenaries" (October 1968), in White, *Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier*, 65, 167.

“that the United States government sponsored a group of saboteurs” who, in the course of waging covert Cold War, “could—and did—lie, cheat, steal, falsify media, hold persons illegally, falsely incriminate, destroy the property of innocent people, plot (though never personally execute) assassinations, and break any civil and criminal code that stood in their way.”¹⁵

The Middle East seldom figured explicitly in *Mission: Impossible* plot lines. The few episodes that were set in Middle Eastern locales usually reaffirmed traditional American stereotypes about a region dominated by barbaric slave traders and ruthless terrorists.¹⁶ But viewers who happened to tune in on 14 December 1969 were treated to what amounted to a fictionalized account of Operation Ajax. Like the CIA in Iran sixteen years earlier, the Impossible Mission Force moved into action in an oil-rich Middle Eastern nation whose pro-Western monarch had been deposed by anti-American rivals. And like the shah of Iran, King Selim III of Qamadan regained his throne thanks to a covert operation straight out of a dime novel.¹⁷ By the time Jim Phelps and his team rescued King Selim in 1969, *Mission: Impossible* had become one of the most widely watched television programs in the world. With its hard-driving trademark theme song and its hard-to-believe plots, *Mission: Impossible*, whether dubbed or with subtitles, quickly became a favorite among viewers in Mexico, Italy, and dozens of other countries. “It was,” according to Reza Badiyi, the Iranian-born director of several episodes during the early 1970s, “the number one show in Iran.” On *Mission: Impossible* nights, everyone “shut down and went home to see it,” Badiyi recalled. “The people regarded it as much more than a television show.”¹⁸

And so it was. Its plots often loosely modeled on the real-life clandestine triumphs of the CIA, its stars heroic figures engaged in a weekly shadow war against global evil, and its message a stirring Cold War affirmation that the ends justified the means, *Mission: Impossible* was nothing less than a symbolic call to covert action heard round the world. For some Americans, the message was probably mildly reassuring, especially as public frustration mounted over an increasingly unpopular overt war in Southeast Asia. For most of the Iranian public, on the other hand, the message was probably more disturbing, especially as America’s long-term clandestine help for the shah became an open secret. But for the U.S. policymakers who had managed America’s secret campaign against revolutionary nationalism inside Iran and its Muslim neighbors for a quarter-century, the message remained as compelling in the 1970s as it had at

15. White, *Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier*, 22.

16. See, for example, “The Slave” (October 1967) and “Terror” (February 1970), both in White, *Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier*, 123–24, 258.

17. See “The Brothers” (December 1969), in White, *Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier*, 247–48.

18. On overseas viewership, see White, *Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier*, 427–29. Badiyi is quoted on p. 428.

the end of the Second World War.¹⁹ Covert action was the key to transforming “mission impossible” into “mission accomplished” in the Middle East.

U.S. clandestine operations in the Muslim world had actually been initiated during the Second World War under the auspices of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the brainchild of William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan, a corporate lawyer with the heart of a soldier of fortune. Although not a major theater for OSS operations, the Middle East was the site of several of Donovan’s earliest experiments in covert action. The first and most controversial came in North Africa, where in November 1942 OSS agents organized the Corps Franc d’Afrique (CFA), which helped ensure the Allied triumph over the pro-Nazi French collaborators who controlled Algeria. Donovan’s agents hastily parted company with the CFA at the end of the year, however, after one of its gunmen assassinated Admiral Jean Darlan, the Vichy proconsul in Algiers who had changed sides a few weeks earlier following secret negotiations with General Dwight Eisenhower, the Allied commander in North Africa.²⁰

Having worn out its welcome in Algiers, the OSS established its Middle Eastern headquarters at the other end of the Mediterranean, in Cairo. By the summer of 1943, American intelligence was running dozens of operations from the Nile Delta to the Fertile Crescent. In Lebanon and Syria, for example, the OSS launched Operation Stallion, which relied on Arab informants to track German submarines in the eastern Mediterranean. Two OSS agents operating out of Baghdad, code-named “Bunny” and “Buffalo,” helped thwart Hitler’s efforts to curry favor in Iraq and neighboring Arab states.²¹ And in an episode straight out of Steven Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Nelson Glueck, a biblical archaeologist who directed the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, helped the OSS wage a covert campaign against Nazi influence in the Holy Land.²² By the end of the war, the OSS had developed a Middle Eastern network of over five hundred agents that extended to every country in the region except Saudi Arabia.²³

America’s fledgling intelligence network in the Middle East, like ones in other parts of the world, disappeared after Harry Truman decided that the OSS was unnecessary in peacetime and disbanded Donovan’s empire on 20 September 1945. Escalating tensions between Moscow and Washington, however, soon

19. Judging from the box-office success of the two *Mission: Impossible* films starring Tom Cruise in 1995 and 2000, that message continues to resonate among the American public long after the end of the Cold War.

20. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Ike’s Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment* (Garden City, NY, 1981), 21–25, 39–56; Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley, 1972), 61–67.

21. U.S. Office of Strategic Services, *The Overseas Targets Report of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC, 1976 [1947]), 49–50.

22. Smith, *OSS*, 125; Archie Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer* (Boston, MA, 1988), 353–54. On Glueck’s academic background, see *Current Biography* 1969, 164–67.

23. OSS, *Overseas Targets Report*, vol. 2: 52–53.

prompted the Missouri Democrat to reexamine his assumptions and seek congressional approval for the establishment of a permanent Central Intelligence Agency in July 1947.²⁴ Within a year, Truman would sign NSC 10/2, a top secret directive authorizing the CIA to undertake “covert action” anywhere in the world as part of America’s global crusade against the Soviet Union. Most of the agency’s earliest operations took place in Europe, where CIA funds flowed to Italian Christian Democrats, Albanian exiles, and anti-Soviet partisans in Latvia and Lithuania.²⁵ But top CIA officials, many of them with ties to the OSS, were also preparing to wage covert Cold War in the Middle East during the late 1940s. As Donovan’s protégés filtered back into the American intelligence bureaucracy in Truman’s Washington, they tended to see communism where earlier they had seen fascism.²⁶

Sometime during the autumn of 1947, one such OSS veteran, Miles Copeland, an Arabic-speaking Alabaman, arrived in Damascus with instructions “to devise a ‘pilot project’ by which we would bring about a sensible state of affairs.” Although the average American could probably not have found Syria on a map after the Second World War, U.S. policymakers regarded the newly-independent wedge-shaped Arab republic as critically important for American strategic and economic objectives in the Middle East. Syrian president Shukri Quwatly, an outspoken nationalist who frequently promised more than he could deliver, inspired little confidence in Washington, where American officials grumbled about his refusal to drop Syria’s territorial claims against Turkey, his rejection of a negotiated settlement on Palestine, and his reluctance to let the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) run a pipeline across his country. Worse still, Quwatly seemed oblivious to the threat posed by left-wing Pan-Arab groups such as the Ba’ath and by the Syrian Communists, who emerged as the largest Marxist party in the Arab world.²⁷ By late 1948, U.S. officials worried that there were really only two possible scenarios for the country. “The first was the possibility that political opportunists, with Soviet support, might stage a bloody uprising against President Quwwatli,” Copeland recalled in his

24. On Truman and the rise of the national security state, see Ranelagh, *The Agency*, 101–11; Trevorton, *Covert Action*, 31–37; and Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA, 1992), 150–51, 174–79, 268–72.

25. Trevorton, *Covert Action*, 20, 38–40; Ranelagh, *The Agency*, 156–59; Prados, *Presidents’ Secret Wars*, 33, 37–52.

26. For OSS concerns about communist inroads in the Middle East, see OSS Report #1749, “Communist and Pro-Russian Trends in the Near East,” 23 May 1944, *OSS/Department of State Intelligence and Research Reports, Part 7: The Middle East 1941–1949*, microfilm edition (Frederick, MD, 1977), reel 1, item 11; and Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, 39–41. On the OSS-CIA link, see Hersh, *The Old Boys*, 176–88, and Bradley Smith, *The Shadow Warriors: O.S.S. and the Origins of the C.I.A.* (New York, 1983), 408–19.

27. On postwar Syria and its ambivalent relationship with the United States, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics* (New Haven, CT, 1986 [1965]), 24–36, and Douglas Little, “Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria 1945–1958,” *Middle East Journal* 44 (Winter 1990): 52–54.

memoirs. “The second was the possibility that the Syrian army, with *our* support (covert, of course), would take over the government and maintain order.” Copeland preferred the second scenario, as did Ambassador James Keeley and Military Attaché Stephen Meade. Their plan was simple. Meade, with Copeland and Keeley’s help, was “to butter up Colonel Husni Za’im,” a Syrian commander “known for his iron will and his brains to match.”²⁸

Beginning on 30 November 1948, Meade and Zaim met secretly at least six times to discuss the “possibility [of an] army supported dictatorship” in Syria. Although the CIA hoped that quiet encouragement would be sufficient to trigger a military takeover, on 14 March 1949 Zaim “requested [that] U.S. agents provoke and abet internal disturbances which [were] ‘essential for coup d’état’ or that U.S. funds be given [to] him [for] this purpose.”²⁹ Neither the agents nor the funds seem to have materialized, but Copeland promised Zaim that “once he was firmly in power our government would immediately give him *de facto* recognition, with *de jure* recognition following in a few days.” Just after midnight on 30 March, Zaim arrested Quwatly, suspended the constitution, and proclaimed a military dictatorship. In short order, the new regime vowed to improve relations with Turkey and Israel, pledged to cooperate fully with ARAMCO, and proceeded to imprison “over 400 Commies [in] all parts of Syria.” As Copeland had promised, the Truman administration formally recognized Zaim’s government on 26 April 1949.³⁰

Husni Zaim’s autocratic style and his pro-Western policies, however, proved far more popular in Washington than in Damascus. On 14 August 1949, less than five months after he himself had seized power, Zaim was overthrown and executed by anti-Western army officers, who were themselves ousted before the year was out in yet another military coup led by Colonel Adib Shishakli. With the CIA’s help, Shishakli would dominate Syrian politics for the next four years, first as army chief of staff and then as president. “Steve Meade and I,” Miles Copeland recalled long afterward, “were constantly in touch with Shishakli,” who welcomed their offer to have “the CIA train key intelligence and security officials” in order to “improve the efficiency of [Syria’s] security services.”³¹ Eager to “show Shishakli how and when we can help him,” the Truman administration declared Syria eligible for U.S. military assistance in December 1951. Yet although Adib Shishakli was far shrewder than Husni Zaim

28. Miles Copeland, *The Game Player: Confessions of the CIA’s Original Political Operative* (London, 1989), 86–87, 92–93 (emphasis in the original).

29. Meade to G-2, tels. 3 Dec. 1948 and 18 and 25 March 1949, “350 Syria,” Box 49, Damascus Post Files, State Department Records of the Diplomatic Posts, Record Group 84, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter NARG84); Little, “Cold War and Covert Action,” 55–57.

30. Copeland, *Game Player*, 92–93; Meade to G-2, tel. 15 April 1949, “Syria Weeka (Part 5),” Box 77, Records of the Army Staff, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 (Intelligence), Record Group 319, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter NARG319).

31. Miles Copeland, *Without Cloak or Dagger* (New York, 1974), 224–25; Copeland to author, 11 November 1986.

and although he received far more American help, in February 1954 he too would be overthrown by left-wing officers and forced into exile next door in Lebanon.³²

Colonel Adnan Malki, the charismatic young Ba'athist who led the coup against Shishakli, pursued a nonaligned foreign policy that many in Washington feared might ultimately convert Syria into a Soviet satellite. Before the year was out, U.S. officials were seeking ways to reverse Syria's swing to the left. As early as 9 October, Colonel Mahmud Shawkat, a leader of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a right-wing paramilitary organization long rumored to have ties to the CIA, approached the American embassy in Damascus with a simple solution. "Something should be done about Colonel Adnan MALKI," Shawkat explained. To that end, "he and some of his colleagues intend to work quietly to develop within the next two years the capability of overthrowing the Syrian government, should it take too leftist a turn."³³ Shawkat updated the Americans on the SSNP's plans early in the new year. Hinting that he was now working with the exiled Shishakli, on 25 January 1955 Shawkat asked U.S. officials point blank: "What would their position be vis-à-vis another coup d'état?"³⁴

Toppling Malki and his left-leaning friends via a clandestine quick fix must have seemed attractive to many inside the Eisenhower administration. Indeed, one of Ike's first actions upon succeeding Harry Truman in the Oval Office in January 1953 had been to order a complete review of U.S. national security policy. Fourteen months later, Eisenhower approved NSC 5412, a super-secret directive superseding Truman's NSC 10/2 and reaffirming Washington's willingness to conduct plausibly deniable covert action. On 12 March 1955, Ike established the Planning Coordination Group, an interagency panel that eventually became known as "Special Group 5412," to oversee all American covert operations abroad. Under the auspices of Special Group 5412, the CIA was instructed to "create and exploit troublesome problems for International Communism" and to "counter any threat of a party or individuals directly or indirectly responsive to Communist control to achieve dominant power in a free world country."³⁵

32. Chargé d'Affaires Harlan Clark to DOS, tel. 30 Nov. 1951, 783.13/11-3051; Assistant Secretary of Defense William Foster to Acheson, 8 Dec. 1951, 783.5 MSP/12-1451, U.S. Department of State, Decimal File, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter Decimal File NARG59). On Shishakli's reign and the coup that brought him down, see Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 141-47, 239-44.

33. Chargé d'Affaires Robert Strong (Damascus) to DOS, 9 October 1954, 783.00/10-954, Decimal File NARG59. For rumors that the SSNP was in contact with the CIA, Labib Zuwiyya Yamak, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (Cambridge, MA, 1966), 70-72, 146.

34. Ambassador James Moose (Damascus) to DOS, 25 January 1955, 783.00/1-2555, Decimal File NARG59.

35. NSC 5412, "Covert Operations," 15 March 1954; NSC 5412/1, "Covert Operations," 12 March 1955; and NSC 5412/2, "Covert Operations," 28 Dec. 1955, all in *Documents of the National Security Council, 1947-1977*, ed. Paul Kesaris (Washington, DC, 1980), microfilm edition, reel 4. For the background on Special Group 5412, see Ranelagh, *The Agency*, 278-80.

Although the records of Special Group 5412 remain classified, one free world country with which it must have been preoccupied during the spring of 1955 was Syria, where Adnan Malki was edging toward a neutralist alliance with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. "Pro-West elements here still have considerable strength," Ambassador James Moose cabled Washington from Damsacus on 8 March, "but need courage to use their strength at [the] critical moment," which could arrive suddenly should the "Communist-infiltrated" Ba'ath party attempt to "gain control of essentials of power."³⁶ Three days later, the American embassy in Cairo confirmed that Nasser was now certain that "Syria's army was on his side" and that Malki intended to set up "a little RCC [Revolutionary Command Council]" sooner rather than later.³⁷ Malki's bid to become a "Syrian Nasser," however, was cut short on 22 April 1955, when an SSNP gunman hoping to trigger a right-wing takeover shot him dead at a soccer match. As early as 3 March, Allen Dulles had told the National Security Council that Syria was "ripe for a military coup d'état."³⁸ During the forty-eight hours immediately preceding the assassination, U.S. intelligence agents learned from pro-Western elements inside the Syrian army that Malki intended to remove Colonel Shawkat and other officers with SSNP connections from their posts, moves that were bound to have "serious repercussions."³⁹ Given the earlier rumors linking right-wing Syrian groups to the United States, many of Malki's Ba'athist followers were convinced that the CIA was behind his murder and lionized their fallen comrade as a victim of American imperialism. The investigation of the Malki affair, Ambassador Moose reported on 27 April, had "taken an anti-Western turn," with "leftists exploiting [the] belief of some Syrians that there is [a] USG-SSNP connection."⁴⁰

The Eisenhower administration indignantly dismissed allegations that America would resort to political murder to achieve its foreign policy goals as outrageous examples of Syrian paranoia. Nevertheless, recently declassified State Department records confirm that U.S. officials *had* actually been in touch with Colonel Mahmud Shawkat, the SSNP leader who subsequently masterminded Malki's murder, as early as October 1954. And Washington's April 1955 disclaimers notwithstanding, Congressional hearings conducted two decades later revealed that the CIA *did* try to arrange for the assassination of several troublesome foreign leaders, including Cuba's Fidel Castro and the Congo's

36. DOS to Moose, tel. 16 February 1955, and Moose to DOS, tel. 8 March 1955, *FRUS* 1955-57, 13: 516-17, 519-20.

37. Byroade to DOS, tel. 11 March 1955, quoted in Geoffrey Aronson, *From Sideshow to Center Stage: U.S. Policy Toward Egypt 1946-1956* (Boulder, CO, 1986), 113.

38. Minutes of the 239th NSC Meeting, 3 March 1955, *FRUS* 1955-57, 12: 27.

39. U.S. Military Attaché (Damascus) to DOS, tels. 20 and 21 April 1955, 783.00/4-2055 and /4-2155, Decimal File, NARG59.

40. Moose to DOS, tel. 27 April 1955, 783.00/4-2755, Decimal File NARG59. On the Malki affair, see Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 238-46.

Patrice Lumumba, during the Eisenhower era.⁴¹ Indeed, with ample evidence of other, less brutal, American covert operations inside Syria dating from the late 1940s and without access to the secret records of the CIA and Special Group 5412, one should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that the United States played some role in Malki's assassination. At the very least, CIA operatives in Damascus during early 1955, like their OSS forebears in Algiers thirteen years earlier at the time of Admiral Darlan's murder, were probably aware of plans to assassinate a foreign leader but did not lift a finger to stop them.

Although the CIA may have smiled on Shawkat and the SSNP for trying to place their country on a pro-Western trajectory, Malki's assassination unleashed a rising tide of anti-Americanism in Damascus that eventually led the Eisenhower administration to launch yet another round of covert action. Syrian voters went to the polls on 18 August 1955 and elected America's old nemesis Shukri Quwatly as president. Before the year was out, Quwatly was working closely with Ba'athist officers like Colonel Abdel Hamid Sarraj to secure Soviet economic and military assistance. Complaining that "Syria was the closest thing in the Middle East to a Soviet satellite," in October 1955 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles informed British officials that there was a real need to effect a radical change in Damascus that would "appear to come spontaneously from within, and not from outside intervention." The British proved enthusiastic, for they were already discussing just such a scenario with Iraqi prime minister Nuri Said, who feared that the left-leaning Quwatly regime was about to shut down the pipelines that carried most of Iraq's petroleum to the Mediterranean.⁴²

During the spring of 1956, U.S. officials moved cautiously toward a covert scheme to install a pro-Western government in Syria. The news from Damascus early in the new year was encouraging. According to Ambassador James Moose, the SSNP and America's old friend Adib Shishakli were plotting "an anti-Communist coup in Syria" and wanted U.S. help. In light of the "rapid spread of Left Wing influence," Moose urged Washington on 8 January "to consider carefully this or any other movement which holds out promise of improving [the] situation."⁴³ By the end of the month Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles were privately discussing covert action in Syria with British prime minister Anthony Eden and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd at the White House. "Syria," Dulles pointed out on 30 January, "seemed to be behav-

41. See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, with an introduction by Frank Church (New York, 1976), passim.

42. Dulles quoted in Anthony Gorst and W. Scott Lucas, "The Other Collusion: Operation Straggle and Anglo-American Intervention in Syria, 1955-56," *Intelligence and National Security* 4 (July 1989): 581-82. On British and Iraqi concerns, see Francis Russell memcon, 26 Oct. 1955, *FRUS 1955-57*, 14: 654-55; and Harold Macmillan to FO, tel. 28 October 1955, vol. 115469, FO371. General Correspondence of the Foreign Office, Public Record Office, Kew, Surrey, England (hereafter PRO FO371).

43. Moose to DOS, tel. 8 January 1956, *FRUS 1955-57*, 13: 563-64.

ing much like a Soviet satellite.” Eisenhower, Eden, and Lloyd were quick to agree and, like Dulles, felt Britain and America should develop “sound plans” in order “to effect a change in Syria.”⁴⁴

A rough outline for a joint Anglo-American covert operation against the Syrian left soon began to take shape. Whitehall and the White House, Selwyn Lloyd informed the British cabinet on 21 March, were secretly working together “to establish in Syria a Government more friendly to the West.”⁴⁵ A week later, President Eisenhower approved Project Omega, a secret blueprint for combatting revolutionary nationalism throughout the Arab world, including Syria, where the CIA and Britain’s MI6 were already hard at work. In early April, Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA’s Middle East chief, flew to London, where he and his British counterpart, Sir George Young, put the finishing touches on plans for a Syrian coup code-named Operation Straggle.⁴⁶

Because key British and American documents are still classified, details of the evolution of Operation Straggle remain sketchy. Young and Roosevelt’s original scheme appears to have called for MI6 operatives to stir up the desert tribes, CIA agents to mobilize the right-wing SSNP, and Turkish troops to mass along the Syrian frontier, all of which would trigger a pro-Western coup by “indigenous anticommunist elements within Syria” assisted, if necessary, by the Iraqi army.⁴⁷ Archie Roosevelt, Kermit’s cousin and Foggy Bottom’s “point man on Syria,” confirmed long afterward that by the summer of 1956, high-ranking U.S. officials regarded the “leftist coalition of forces supported by the Soviets” in Damascus as “a target legally authorized by statute for CIA political action.”⁴⁸ And after the Quwatly regime applauded Nasser’s seizure of the Suez Canal in late July, the Eisenhower administration “increased its efforts to counteract leftist influence in Syria” by working secretly with “conservative elements” who were “considering steps which might be taken to bring about an improvement.”⁴⁹

As the Suez crisis deepened, however, Whitehall tried to sidetrack Operation Straggle in order to concentrate on preparations for the U.K. invasion of Egypt. Frustrated that the British were “deliberately keeping us in the dark,” CIA director Allen Dulles and his brother John Foster nevertheless pressed forward with plans for a Syrian coup in mid-October. Wilbur Eveland, a U.S.

44. DOS to Moose, tel. 13 January 1956, and DOS memcon, MC-1, 30 January 1956, *FRUS* 1955-57, 13: 565, 567.

45. Cabinet Minutes, 21 March 1956, CM(56) 24, CAB 128/30, Public Record Office, Kew, England (hereafter PRO CAB 128).

46. On Project Omega, see DOS memo, “United States Policy in the Near East,” 28 March 1956, and Eisenhower diary entry, 28 March 1956, *FRUS* 1955-57, 14: 409-18, 425. On Roosevelt, Young, and Straggle, see Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America’s Failure in the Middle East* (New York, 1980), 168-72.

47. Gorst and Lucas, “Other Collusion,” 584-88; Little, “Cold War and Covert Action,” 66; and Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 191-92.

48. Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing*, 444-45.

49. Foster Dulles to Moose, 21 Sept. 1956, *FRUS* 1955-57, 13: 591-93.

intelligence agent stationed in Damascus, was instructed to provide the Syrian conspirators with \$150,000 in cash plus assurances of speedy American recognition if their 29 October coup d'état were successful. Just hours before the right-wing takeover was to occur, however, Syrian counterintelligence uncovered Operation Straggle, forcing Eveland and his fellow coup-makers to flee to Beirut.⁵⁰ The next morning, the Dulles brothers briefly considered whether to continue "Stragglings" toward "an anti-communist government" in Syria. Both quickly agreed that "it would be a mistake to try to pull it off now" in the midst of the controversial tripartite military intervention unfolding simultaneously in Egypt. But ten days later, Allen Dulles told his brother that "Operation Straggle might be carried forward when the British and French troops are out."⁵¹

Undaunted by their fiasco in Syria during the autumn of 1956, the CIA and the State Department did in fact seek to resurrect Operation Straggle after the last British, French, and Israeli forces withdrew from Egyptian territory during the winter of 1957. As early as 2 January John Foster Dulles told a closed-door Senate hearing on the Eisenhower Doctrine that if Syria or any other country in the Middle East or North Africa fell under the Kremlin's control, the United States would "encourage the people of those areas, if there should be a Soviet regime, to overthrow it."⁵² Four weeks later Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, confirmed that the Eisenhower administration would do everything it possibly could "diplomatically and covertly to encourage the Syrians to resist communism."⁵³ Off the record, British intelligence confirmed in May that the Eisenhower administration remained determined to "achieve a political change in Syria," but that this time the CIA would move ahead without the help of the MI6.⁵⁴

Over the summer, the CIA completed plans for Operation Wappen, the code name for its latest covert operation in Syria. Sometime in June, Howard Stone, a political action specialist who had participated in Operation Ajax four years earlier in Tehran, arrived in Damascus with instructions to help right-wing dissidents inside the Syrian army organize a coup d'état.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, former president Adib Shishakli arrived in Beirut, where he assured the CIA's Kermit

50. Foster Dulles phone call to Allen Dulles, 18 Oct. 1956, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, John Foster Dulles Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter DDEL); Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 217–30.

51. Foster Dulles phone call to Allen Dulles, 30 Oct. 1956, and Foster Dulles phone call to Hoover, 9 Nov. 1956, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

52. Dulles testimony 2 Jan. 1957, in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 85th Congress, 1st Session, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)*, vol. 9 (Washington, DC, 1978): 10–12, 25.

53. Radford testimony, 30 January 1957, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions*, 9: 184.

54. C. L. Sulzberger, *The Last of the Giants* (New York: 1970), 401–02.

55. For an account of Operation Wappen based on interviews with Howard Stone, see David Ignatius, "In from the Cold," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 October 1979.

Roosevelt that he was ready to lead a military uprising in Syria. Galvanized into action by the announcement of a Syro-Soviet grain-for-weapons deal in late July, the Eisenhower administration evidently gave the green light for Operation Wappen during early August.⁵⁶ But according to U.S. ambassador Charles Yost, who served briefly in Damascus during late 1957, it was “a particularly clumsy CIA plot” and was “penetrated by Syrian intelligence” almost at once. Patrick Seale, an Arabic-speaking British journalist who interviewed many key figures in the episode, revealed just how clumsy a few years later. “Half a dozen Syrian officers approached by American officials immediately reported back to the authorities,” Seale noted in 1965, “so that the plot was doomed from the start.”⁵⁷

Abdel Hamid Sarraj, the Ba’athist colonel who served as Syria’s chief of counterintelligence, snuffed out Operation Wappen before it ever got off the ground. Just before dusk on 12 August 1957, Sarraj’s security forces arrested several of the leading Syrian conspirators, surrounded the American embassy, and declared Howard Stone and two other CIA operatives *persona non grata*. Cloaking himself in plausible deniability, Dwight Eisenhower thundered that Sarraj’s “slandorous campaign” against America proved that Syria was rapidly becoming a Soviet satellite. Off the record, however, U.S. and U.K. correspondents in Damascus were able to confirm that Sarraj’s charges were probably true.⁵⁸ Although for a brief moment in late August it appeared that the White House might invoke the Eisenhower Doctrine and send in troops, by early autumn Ike was edging away from intervention in Syria.⁵⁹

As it had nine months earlier during Operation Straggle, CIA covert action in Syria had once again backfired. Designed to install a pro-Western regime without having to resort to armed force, Operation Wappen nearly triggered the very military confrontation it was supposed to avert and actually strengthened the hand of anti-Western forces. Indeed, thanks in large measure to the CIA’s bungled attempts at coup-making in Damascus, Sarraj and other Ba’athist leaders fled to Cairo in early 1958, where they persuaded Gamal Abdel Nasser that Syria and Egypt should be merged to create a single United Arab Republic (UAR).⁶⁰

56. David W. Lesch, *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower’s Cold War in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO, 1992), 138–41; Little, “Cold War and Covert Action,” 70–71.

57. Charles Yost, *History and Memory* (New York, 1980), 236–37; Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 294.

58. Ambassador Charles Johnston to FO, tel. 26 Aug. 1957, Vol. 128245, PRO FO371; diary entry for 24 Sept. 1957, in Drew Pearson, *Diaries 1949–1959*, ed. Tyler Abell (New York, 1974), 393–94.

59. Lesch, *Syria and the United States*, 138–72; Little, “Cold War and Covert Action,” 70–74; Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm* (New York, 1971), 279–80; and Cabinet Minutes, 27 Aug. 1957, CC(57) 63, CAB 128/31, PRO.

60. Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 318–26; Little, “Cold War and Covert Action,” 69–75. For a more detailed account of CIA involvement in Syria that minimizes the U.S. role in Zaim’s coup but that corroborates subsequent American covert action during the 1950s, see Andrew

By the late 1950s, Gamal Abdel Nasser had already had several close encounters with American clandestine operations in the Middle East, both as a client and as a target. CIA spooks had evidently begun their covert work in the land of the sphinx sometime in late 1951, a few months before the revolution that brought Nasser, Mohammad Naguib, and their fellow Free Officers to power. At first, the CIA worked hard behind the scenes to avert a political upheaval in Cairo, but Egypt's headstrong King Farouk ignored quiet American suggestions that he reform his dissolute ways, forcing the agency to consider other options. According to Miles Copeland, Kermit Roosevelt flew to Cairo in March 1952 to meet secretly with Nasser, who made it clear that only the army could end the chronic political instability that was making Egypt vulnerable to communist subversion. Roosevelt remained in Egypt until early July before returning to Washington to report that the Free Officers would strike before the month was out. "No one in our government must get the idea that it was our coup," Roosevelt hastened to add. "It would be strictly an indigenous affair, almost totally free from our influence which we could assist only by not opposing it."⁶¹ Historians have long been skeptical of Copeland's claims that he and Roosevelt helped mastermind the 1952 Egyptian revolution. The best recent account of Nasser's seizure of power, however, suggests that although CIA certainly did not plan the coup d'état, it may have been aware of the Free Officers' intentions well in advance.⁶²

While the nature of America's covert relationship with Nasser prior to 23 July 1952 remains shrouded in mystery, after that date the CIA clearly emerged as an important instrument in Washington's efforts to shape events in Cairo. Nasser's budding friendship with Kermit Roosevelt became an open secret during the mid-1950s. "Nasser I had known since his accession to power," Roosevelt confirmed long afterward, "before he discarded his 'cover' General Naguib."⁶³ The CIA funneled several million dollars into Egypt, some of which, according to Miles Copeland, flowed to the *mukhabarat*, the chief Egyptian intelligence agency, which was waging its own covert war against Nasser's fanatical opponents in the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, the CIA evidently supplied Nasser with the bulletproof vest that enabled him to escape death at the hands of a would-be assassin in October 1954. By early 1955, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of CIA operatives like Roosevelt and Copeland, Egypt's Free Officers and the Eisenhower administration believed they could do business with each other.⁶⁴

Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961* (New York, 1995).

61. Copeland, *Game Player*, 145-56.

62. Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York, 1992), 162-64.

63. Kermit Roosevelt to author, 30 August 1985.

64. Copeland, *Game Player*, 158-65.

Nasser's decision to purchase arms from the Soviet bloc in September 1955, however, soured his relationship with the United States. A few hours after word arrived from Kermit Roosevelt in Cairo on 26 September that the Egyptians had agreed to swap their cotton for Russian tanks and jets, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles met with British foreign secretary Harold Macmillan to consider how best to respond to the Kremlin's diplomatic coup in the Middle East. Nasser, Dulles growled, must be made to understand that there would be "grave consequences for Egypt." Macmillan spelled out just what those consequences might be: "We could make life miserable for Nasser and ultimately bring about his fall by various pressures."⁶⁵ Evelyn Shuckburgh, Macmillan's chief Middle Eastern adviser, summed up the options facing America and Britain far more bluntly after the meeting adjourned: "We must first try to frighten Nasser, then to bribe him, and if neither works, get rid of him."⁶⁶

British and American intelligence evidently did not at first see eye to eye regarding how to accomplish this objective. James Eichelberger, the CIA station chief in Cairo, was appalled to learn in early 1956 that the MI6 was "determined to 'do a Mossadeg'" in Egypt and was actually considering "the possibility of assassinating Nasser."⁶⁷ Shying away from such extreme solutions, the Eisenhower administration preferred instead to employ psychological countermeasures, including "extensive use of Egyptian media channels" to "play down" Nasser and "play up" his more moderate Arab rivals.⁶⁸ Later that spring, however, CIA officials began actively to discuss "covert action to diminish Nasser's influence in other Arab countries" with their MI6 counterparts under the auspices of Project Omega.⁶⁹ One result of these discussions was Operation Straggle in Syria. Another may have been a top secret plan to topple Nasser.

Almost all materials relating to Project Omega remain classified, but fragmentary evidence suggests that by the summer of 1956, the Eisenhower administration was indeed contemplating drastic measures in Egypt. In a memorandum prepared on 18 July 1956, just one day before the United States triggered the Suez crisis by withdrawing its offer to help Egypt finance the Aswan Dam, Elbert G. Mathews, a senior member of Foggy Bottom's Policy Planning Staff, warned his superiors that "the cost of overthrowing Nasser [would be] prohibitive," both politically and diplomatically. "Should we attempt to displace the well-entrenched Nasser regime," Mathews emphasized, "our hand could

65. DOS, Dulles-Macmillan memcon, 26 September 1955, and Hoover to Foster Dulles (USUN), 2 tels. 27 September 1955, *FRUS 1955-57*, 14: 516-22.

66. Diary entry for 26 September 1955, in Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Foreign Office Diaries 1951-1956* (New York, 1986), 520-21.

67. Mohamed H. Heikal, *Cutting the Lion's Tail: Suez through Egyptian Eyes* (London, 1986), 103-04.

68. Huntington Damon (USIA) to MacArthur, 10 April 1956, "Omega-Memos March/April 1956," Box 37, Lot 59D 518, NARG59.

69. Minute by Adam Watson, 2 May 1956, Vol. 723, Selwyn Lloyd Papers, FO 800, PRO.

hardly remain hidden, particularly if—as is not improbable—it were necessary to instigate and support an uprising in Egypt.” Furthermore, “our involvement in Nasser’s overthrow would confirm throughout the Arab and Asian areas widespread suspicion of our imperialist intentions.”⁷⁰

The stakes against which the Eisenhower administration had to measure the costs of covert action in Egypt, however, rose enormously after Nasser seized control of the Suez Canal on 26 July. Rumors that Prime Minister Anthony Eden was preparing to oust this Middle Eastern “Mussolini” and replace him with an unidentified pro-Western officer circulated on both sides of the Atlantic during August. “I just can’t understand why the British did not bump off Nasser,” Dwight Eisenhower grumbled privately in early September as he worked to avert open U.K. military intervention in Egypt. “They have been doing it for years and then when faced with it they fumble.”⁷¹ Peter Wright, who served with British counterintelligence during the mid-1950s, claimed long afterward that Whitehall had in fact tried to bump Nasser off. “At the beginning of the Suez Crisis,” Wright recalled in his controversial memoir *Spycatcher*, “MI6 developed a plan, through the London station, to assassinate Nasser using nerve gas.” It is unclear whether any American officials were privy to this British scheme, which Wright admits never got off the drawing board and which Wright’s critics dismiss as a figment of his imagination.⁷²

Although it seems quite unlikely that Ike ever urged the British to kill Nasser in the autumn of 1956, there is strong evidence that John Foster Dulles did discuss plans for a pro-Western coup in Egypt with top U.K. officials during a visit to London in late September. In a personal postmortem on the Suez debacle prepared in January 1957, Anthony Eden claimed that he and Dulles had agreed four months earlier that Britain and America “should work out alone and in the utmost secrecy a means of bringing Nasser down.”⁷³ Recently declassified U.S. records reveal that Dulles did in fact meet privately with Eden after dinner on 20 September 1956 to discuss a “matter not to be committed in writing.” Those records also reveal that Dulles and British foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd agreed the next day to set up “a very secret working party here to consider continuously economic and political means of weakening and lessening the prestige of the regime of Colonel Nasser.”⁷⁴ While the file containing Whitehall’s accounts of all this remains sealed under Britain’s “Hundred Year Rule,” Eden did tell Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan on

70. Mathews, “US Policy in the Middle East,” 18 July 1956, “Omega Memos—July/August 1956,” Box 37, Lot 59D 518, NARG59.

71. Ike’s remarks to White House counsel Bernard Shanley, 4 September 1956, are quoted in Piers Brendon, *Ike: His Life & Times* (New York, 1986), 326.

72. Peter Wright, *Spycatcher* (New York, 1987), 160–61. For a recent detailed account of MI6 activities in Egypt during the Suez crisis, see Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service* (New York, 2000), 600–51.

73. Eden, “Suez,” January 1957, quoted in Keith Kyle, *Suez* (New York, 1991), 150.

74. Dulles memcon, 20 September 1956, and DOS memcon, 21 September 1956, *FRUS* 1955–57, 16: 545–46, 548–50.

23 September that “the Americans’ main contention is that we can bring Nasser down by degrees rather than the Mossadeg lines.” When Macmillan flew to Washington two days later for another round of talks with America’s peripatetic secretary of state, John Foster Dulles wanted “to talk about different methods of getting rid of Nasser.”⁷⁵

But as the Suez Crisis deepened later that autumn, top U.S. officials began to wonder whether it might be better to postpone getting rid of the Egyptian leader until the situation in the Middle East was more normal. On 8 October, Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., informed the White House of a “visit of a group with one of our agencies on how to topple Nasser.” Hoover “questioned whether this is the time to attempt this.” So did President Eisenhower. “An action of this kind could not be taken when there is as much active hostility as at present,” Ike pointed out. “For a thing like this to be done without inflaming the Arab world, a time free from heated stress holding the world’s attention as at present would have to be chosen.”⁷⁶ As a result, when Selwyn Lloyd passed along a proposal for joint Anglo-American covert action entitled “Means of Bringing about the Fall of Nasser” and code-named “Mask” nine days later, John Foster Dulles expressed “misgivings over setting forth so clearly our intentions.” According to Anthony Eden, Dulles also “asked that the title should be changed to something more innocuous.”⁷⁷

Dulles’s misgivings about Operation Mask, however, became academic on 29 October after Israel invaded Egypt with Britain’s blessing and triggered the Suez crisis. All plans for covert action in Cairo “should of course be held in abeyance,” Dulles advised Selwyn Lloyd. “During my talk with Anthony [Eden] at your dinner on September 20, I expressed the view that through longer term and peaceful measures we should accomplish the objective rather than through forcible measures.”⁷⁸ Although most of the records relating to Operation Mask remain classified on both sides of the Atlantic, it seems likely that the nasty falling out between Britain and America during the Suez crisis stemmed at least in part from a misunderstanding about covert action. Eisenhower and Dulles preferred to bring Nasser down gradually with the help of the CIA and the MI6, while Eden, Lloyd, and Macmillan preferred to proceed more swiftly with the help of the Israeli army and the Royal Navy.

Despite lingering Anglo-American recriminations over the Suez affair, by mid-1957 the Eisenhower administration was evidently seeking Whitehall’s

75. Eden to Macmillan, tel. 23 September 1956, Vol. 740, Selwyn Lloyd Papers, FO800, PRO; Macmillan, “Note of a Private Talk with Mr. Dulles,” 25 September 1956, Folder 1102, PREM 11, Records of the Prime Minister’s Office, PRO.

76. Goodpaster memcon, 8 Oct. 1956, “Diary–Staff Memos Oct. 1956,” Box 19, DDE Diary Series, Whitman File, DDEL.

77. Eden, “Suez,” January 1957, quoted in Kyle, *Suez*, 150; Foster Dulles to Lloyd, n.d., attached to Rountree to Foster Dulles, 30 October 1956, “Mask–US–UK Bilateral,” Box 36, Lot 59D 518, NARG59.

78. Foster Dulles to Lloyd, n.d., attached to Rountree to Foster Dulles, 30 October 1956, “Mask–US–UK Bilateral,” Box 36, Lot 59D 518, NARG59.

help for yet another covert operation in Egypt. After the Egyptians denounced the Eisenhower Doctrine and refused to reopen the Suez Canal as scheduled, Ike met with CIA director Allen Dulles on 22 March to consider whether or not “to dispose of Nasser, by continuing and perhaps intensifying the subtle but substantial pressures that are working on him.”⁷⁹ Sanitized telephone logs from April and May indicate that the Dulles brothers believed that key figures in Cairo might be “switching on Nasser” thanks to the efforts of the CIA.⁸⁰ Years later, Robert Amory, who headed the CIA’s research branch, confirmed that in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, the agency’s action arm had been very busy “arranging for the overthrow of Nasser with the support of the Egyptian army.”⁸¹

These covert plans evidently took on more tangible form during the summer of 1957. According to Wilbur Eveland, by July “a triumvirate consisting of the Secretary of State, Allen Dulles, and Kermit Roosevelt” was orchestrating Operation SIPONY, which called for the CIA “to work with the British to bring down Nasser without further delay” by sparking “a palace revolution” in Egypt.⁸² And Miles Copeland has claimed that at just about this time he himself “sat down with a team of British and American intelligence officers to plot the overthrow of Nasser for real.”⁸³ Two decades later, even darker rumors surfaced suggesting that the CIA and the MI6 had secretly tried to have Nasser assassinated some time during 1957. A U.S. Senate committee looked into these rumors in 1975 but could find no conclusive evidence that Nasser had ever been targeted for what the CIA euphemistically called “executive action.”⁸⁴

Not without reason, however, Nasser himself remained convinced down to his death in 1970 that his former friends in the CIA were out to overthrow him. In March 1958, for example, U.S. intelligence apparently attempted to short-circuit Nasser’s new UAR by encouraging Saudi Arabia’s King Saud to pay Syria’s Abdul Hamid Sarraj \$5 million to call off the merger with Egypt. But according to one CIA official, Sarraj “made a monkey out of Saud” by turning the bribe over to Nasser.⁸⁵ “The United States was implicated,” another U.S. policymaker admitted privately on 14 March, “by Sarraj’s report that he had been informed that the United States knew of the plot and had agreed to recognize the new government.”⁸⁶ Not surprisingly, when anti-Nasser forces

79. Goodpaster memcon, 22 March 1957, “March 57 Diary–Staff Memos (1),” Box 22, DDE Diary Series, Whitman File, DDEL.

80. Allen Dulles to Foster Dulles phone call, 3 April 1957, and Foster Dulles to Allen Dulles phone call, 28 May 1957, Memoranda of Telephone Conversations, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

81. Amory quoted in Hersh, *Old Boys*, 502, note 32.

82. Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 247; Ranelagh, *The Agency*, 298.

83. Copeland, *Game Player*, 167.

84. Ranelagh, *The Agency*, 766–67, note 55; Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 247.

85. Foster Dulles to Ambassador Donald Heath (Jidda), tel. 3 March 1958, *FRUS* 1958–60, 12: 714; Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 273. For the “monkey” metaphor, see CIA Station Chief Tracy Barnes (London) to Patrick Dean (FO), 21 March 1958, V1195/4T, Vol. 133799, FO371, PRO.

86. Rountree to Foster Dulles, 14 March 1958, *FRUS* 1958–60, 12: 719.

staged a successful coup in Damascus in September 1961 and pulled Syria out of the UAR, the Egyptian leader blamed the CIA.⁸⁷

Discounting Washington's assurances that Syria's secession was not the product of American covert action, Nasser redoubled his efforts to forge a pan-Arab coalition to reduce U.S. influence in the Middle East and kept a close watch on CIA activities in Egypt. Convinced that the agency was planning another coup in July 1965, Nasser expelled two CIA officials, station chief Eugene Trone and political action specialist Bruce Odell, and arrested Mustapha Amin, a leading journalist with close ties to both U.S. intelligence and the Egyptian army.⁸⁸ As the summer drew to a close, top UAR officials continued to insist that "the CIA is seeking to overthrow the regime" while the Cairo press ran exposés with catchy headlines like "Secrets of American Intelligence."⁸⁹ Although U.S. diplomats angrily dismissed such allegations as Soviet-inspired canards, the CIA had meddled in Egypt so long and so often that Nasser, by the end of his life, attributed almost every setback to covert American machinations. Israel's smashing victory in the 1967 Six Day War, he insisted, would have been impossible without intelligence provided by the CIA. Nor would King Hussein ever have dared to expel Egyptian-backed Palestinian radicals from Jordan in September 1970, Nasser remarked just days before he died of a heart attack, without the CIA's blessing.⁹⁰

Ironically, the agency would eventually come to regard Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, as one of its most prized friends in the Middle East. Once Egypt started down the path to peace with Israel during the mid-1970s, America did everything it could to keep the chief peacemaker in Cairo alive and well. According to journalist Bob Woodward, by 1979 U.S. policymakers had launched "a CIA security operation, designed to provide President Anwar Sadat with protection and with warnings of coup and assassination plots." Despite "electronic and human access to Egypt's government, its society, and its leaders," however, the agency was no more effective than Egyptian intelligence in monitoring the Islamic extremists who assassinated Sadat in October 1981.⁹¹

87. Mohammed Heikal, *The Cairo Documents* (Garden City, NY, 1973), 204–06; John S. Badeau Oral History, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA (hereafter JFKL), 10–11. Badeau was the American ambassador to the UAR in September 1961.

88. On the Amin affair and its aftermath, see Anthony Nutting, *Nasser* (New York, 1972), 376–78; R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Egypt Under Nasir* (Albany, NY), 238–40; William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt, 1955–1981* (Albany, NY, 1985), 167; and *Boston Globe*, 25 October 1976.

89. Rodger Davies memcon, 27 August 1965, "UAR, Vol. 4," Box 159, Country File, NSF:CO, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX (hereafter LBJL). During a telephone interview with the author on 5 October 1991, Bruce Odell confirmed that he had been a CIA operative in Cairo in 1965, but he would neither confirm nor deny allegations that he and Amin were plotting a coup against Nasser.

90. Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 247–49; Andrew Cockburn and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York, 1991), 146–47; Mohammed Heikal, *Road to Ramadan* (New York, 1975), 99.

91. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981–1987* (New York, 1987), 31, 87, 312–13. Woodward does not disclose his sources, but he implies that they include both

Ever suspicious of the CIA and never one to trust any intelligence service but his own, Gamal Abdel Nasser would probably have regarded this tragic episode as further proof that the United States did not have any permanent friends in the Middle East, only temporary assets.

Just as Nasser was not America's only Middle Eastern foe to be targeted by the CIA, so too Sadat was not America's only Muslim friend to receive covert help. Jordan, the hatchet-shaped land that 1.5 million Palestinians called home, had not loomed large in U.S. calculations until eighteen-year-old King Hussein ascended the Hashemite throne in May 1953.⁹² From the very start, Hussein's remarkable forty-five-year reign was made possible in large measure by financial help from Washington. Reports circulated during the mid-1950s of "lavish CIA payments" to pro-Western figures in Amman, including Zayn, the queen mother of Jordan, who allegedly received several million dollars "in the hope that she would influence and manipulate her son, King Hussein."⁹³ While such rumors are difficult to confirm, one of the anti-Nasser initiatives outlined in Project Omega did entail clandestine operations in Jordan. To "prevent a situation in which a pro-Egyptian coup d'état would succeed" in toppling the Hashemite monarchy, John Foster Dulles urged Ike in early 1956 to approve "CIA-type activity, including the expenditure of a substantial amount of covert funds."⁹⁴ When left-wing Jordanian officers backed by Palestinian radicals tried to seize power a year later, the CIA adopted a more direct approach and placed King Hussein himself on its payroll under the auspices of Operation NOBEEF. For the next two decades, the agency delivered approximately \$750,000 in cash each year to the royal palace so that the king would allow "United States intelligence agents to operate freely in his country."⁹⁵

Keeping Hussein in power indefinitely with covert help from the CIA was not an end in itself but rather a means to prevent the breakup of his kingdom, an event that most American officials believed would lead Israel to seize the West Bank and ignite a full-scale Arab-Israeli war. Although U.S. intelligence worked closely with the king after 1964 to curtail the activities of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Harrison Symmes, Foggy Bottom's chief Jordanian expert, complained that the CIA's "buddy-buddy relationship with

American and Egyptian intelligence operatives. He also implies that the CIA operation had Sadat's blessing.

92. Douglas Little, "A Puppet in Search of a Puppeteer? The United States, King Hussein, and Jordan 1953-1970," *International History Review* 17, no. 3 (August 1995): 514-16.

93. Leonard Mosley, *Dulles: A Biography of Eleanor, Allen, and John Foster Dulles and Their Family Network* (New York, 1978), 350.

94. Dulles to Ike, 28 March 1956, transcription of item 429, reel 11, side 1, Louis Gerson Papers, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. Gerson was permitted to examine many classified materials from the Eisenhower and Dulles papers for a biography of John Foster Dulles that he published in 1967. For a sanitized version of this memorandum, see *FRUS 1955-57*, 15: 419-21.

95. On Operation NOBEEF, see *New York Times*, 18, 19, and 20 February 1977, and Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community* (Boston, MA, 1990), p. 213.

Hussein” actually served to “compromise the effective conduct” of American policy in the Middle East. Despite excellent contacts inside the royal palace, for example, the agency failed to predict the king’s decision to align himself with Egypt in late May 1967, something that many observers believed made the Six Day War inevitable.⁹⁶ Hussein’s alliance with Nasser “took all of us totally by surprise,” Findley Burns, the U.S. ambassador to Jordan in June 1967, grumbled long afterward, “including the CIA, which had very close relations with the Jordanians.”⁹⁷

Neither the State Department nor the CIA, however, was surprised by the outcome of the war. Israel inflicted a humiliating defeat on Hussein, stripping his realm of both Arab East Jerusalem and the West Bank, driving the PLO and another half million Palestinian refugees across the Jordan River onto the East Bank, and accelerating the Hashemite Kingdom’s slide toward the civil war that erupted in “Black September” three years later. After Hussein narrowly escaped death in a PLO ambush on 31 August 1970, CIA station chief Jack O’Connell paid a call at the royal palace to say that top U.S. officials believed that only by unleashing the Jordanian army against the Palestinian guerrillas could the king save his throne. With Washington’s blessing, Hussein sent his army into the Palestinian refugee camps that ringed Amman to root out the PLO infrastructure. Throughout the bloody civil war that enveloped Jordan soon thereafter, CIA officials were “holding hands in the palace,” plotting strategy and stiffening King Hussein’s resolve in the face of an unexpected armored foray toward Amman launched by the pro-Palestinian regime in Damascus on 21 September.⁹⁸ Covert encouragement from the CIA and overt diplomatic support from the Nixon administration helped the king rout the Palestinian guerrillas, thwart the Syrian intervention, and weather the Black September crisis. Indeed, the CIA maintained its buddy-buddy relationship with Hussein until early 1977, when congressional investigators probing the agency’s covert operations in the third world leaked details of Operation NOBEEF to the press, forcing the Carter administration to discontinue all cash payments to the Jordanian monarch.⁹⁹

By the mid-1970s, rumors were circulating that the CIA had also channeled secret funds into Saudi Arabia two decades earlier to ensure that the House of Saud, like the Hashemites in Jordan, pursued pro-Western policies. As early as 1957, the Eisenhower administration had approved a modest arms package for Saudi Arabia as part of an effort to convert recently crowned King Saud, the spendthrift son of the late Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, into a conservative counterweight to Nasser and the Arab radicals. According to Leonard Mosley, who

96. Harrison Symmes Oral History Interview, Foreign Service Oral History Project, Lauinger Library, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (hereafter FSOHP).

97. Findley Burns Oral History Interview, FSOHP, Georgetown University.

98. Little, “Puppet in Search of a Puppeteer?” 539–43; and Cockburn and Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison*, 166–70 (the “holding hands” quote is on page 168).

99. *New York Times*, 19 February 1977.

interviewed many former intelligence officials for his biography of the Dulles brothers, “the CIA [also] paid King Saud’s enormous bills, eventually to the tune of nearly \$40 million,” much of which went for concubines and contraband.¹⁰⁰

Whether or not the agency actually bankrolled King Saud’s debauchery, it does seem to have worked overtime during the late 1950s to ensure that he did not meet the same fate as Egypt’s playboy king. The CIA’s worries about the future of Saudi Arabia multiplied after Saud’s attempt to break up the fledgling UAR backfired in March 1958, triggering a power struggle in Riyadh with his Machiavellian younger brother, Crown Prince Faisal, who adopted a pro-Nasser posture. Reluctant openly to take sides, in late 1958 the Eisenhower administration did begin to monitor “groups of army officers which have plans for future oppositionist activity” and agreed to provide “training for the Saudi Arabian armed forces for internal security purposes.”¹⁰¹ Eighteen months later the CIA uncovered plans for a pro-Nasser coup in Riyadh and alerted not only King Saud but also Crown Prince Faisal, whose sympathy for the UAR cooled considerably upon learning that he had been targeted for assassination.¹⁰²

After spending the following four years stripping his older brother of all but ceremonial powers and stripping himself of any remaining Nasserite delusions, Faisal formally ascended the Saudi throne in March 1964. Among the new king’s first moves was to appoint a trusted friend, Kamal Adhan, to head up Saudi Arabia’s newly created General Intelligence Directorate (GID) which, according to British journalist Peter Holden, was “quick to develop a special relationship with the C.I.A.” Not surprisingly, when King Faisal broke up a plot by junior officers to overthrow the Saudi monarchy five years later, rumors circulated that the CIA had tipped off Saudi intelligence, as it had done in 1960.¹⁰³

King Faisal needed even more American help in Southwest Arabia, where the pro-Nasser Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) seemed determined to export its revolutionary ideology and topple the pro-Western House of Saud. The Saudis had been running guns to anti-YAR guerrillas in Yemen since early 1963, as had the British, who were locked in a bloody battle with left-wing Arab nationalists

100. Mosley, *Dulles*, 350–51.

101. SNIE 30.1–58, “Implications of Recent Governmental Changes in Saudi Arabia,” 8 April 1958; SNIE 36.6–58, “Outlook for Saudi Arabia,” 9 September 1958; NSC 5820/1, “U.S. Policy toward the Near East,” 4 November 1958, *FRUS* 1958–60, 12: 195–96, 726–28, 734–35.

102. DOS to Ambassador Donald Heath, tel. 22 July 1960, *FRUS* 1958–60, 12: 762–63. Reading between the lines of three long and heavily sanitized footnotes to this cable, it is clear that the source of the information that Foggy Bottom passed along to Ambassador Heath was the CIA.

103. Peter Holden, *The House of Saud* (New York, 1978), 229, 277. For an account of a series of abortive coups against the House of Saud during the late 1960s, see Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era: Regime and Elites; Conflict and Collaboration* (Boulder, CO, 1988), 114–18. Abir writes (p. 117) that “by 1969 the Kingdom’s security forces had been reorganised, expanded and trained by American experts and enjoyed practically unlimited budgets.”

next door in Whitehall's Aden protectorate. YAR president Abdallah al-Sallal, who was already receiving both guns and troops from Nasser's UAR, denounced Faisal as a Western stooge and hinted that Yemen might soon seek help from the Kremlin. Although many key materials are still unavailable, a careful reading of fragmentary declassified records suggests that some time during the summer of 1966, the CIA and the Saudis began to organize a pro-Western coup d'état in Taiz, the Yemeni administrative capital. On 27 July, U.S. officials reported that the Kremlin, with Sallal and Nasser's help, was rumored to be preparing "a massive communist offensive" in Southwest Arabia and that "friendly Yemenis have lost no time in alerting the Embassy." A week later, one very friendly Yemeni, Sheik Muhammad Ali Uthman, secretly asked an American diplomat for \$700,000 in cash to finance an "openly anti-UAR coup in Yemen." Foggy Bottom was eager to reduce Nasser's influence but questioned "the seriousness and reliability [of the] plotters" and, for the record, informed Uthman that "it [was] contrary . . . to USG policy to become involved in Yemeni internal politics."¹⁰⁴ In April 1967, however, Sallal's counterintelligence service raided the offices of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) in Taiz, seized documents allegedly linking Uthman and other Yemeni dissidents to the CIA, and arrested three American citizens as spies.¹⁰⁵

By angrily dismissing Sallal's charges as pure paranoia and by threatening to sever U.S. relations with Yemen, the Johnson administration managed to win the release of the three Americans in early May. White House denials notwithstanding, however, by the summer of 1967 the top secret 303 Committee, an interagency panel that Lyndon Johnson had established three years earlier to replace Eisenhower's Special Group 5412, was monitoring some sort of covert operation in Yemen. In mid-July, LBJ met with his top aides to review "Yemen: 303."¹⁰⁶ On 3 August, the CIA station in Riyadh reported that the Saudis had stepped up arms shipments to Sallal's opponents, who "must prove their salt within three months, or all supplies and subsidies will be stopped."¹⁰⁷ Three months later almost to the day, President Abdallah al-Sallal was deposed in a military coup led by three men—Abdal Rahman al-Iryani, Ahmad Numan, and

104. AmEmbassy (Taiz) to DOS, "U.S. Policy Assessment: Yemen," 27 July 1966; Dinsmore (Taiz) to Raymond Hare (NEA), tel. 11 August 1966, "Yemen, Vol. 2," Box 161, Country File, NSF, LBJL. For a different interpretation of the "Uthman scheme" emphasizing American noninvolvement, see Ahmed Noman Kassim Almadhazi, *Yemen and the United States: A Study of a Small Power and Super-State Relationship 1962-1994* (New York, 1996), 75-76.

105. Walt Rostow to LBJ, 27 April 1967; Yemen Task Force, "Situation Report," 30 April 1967, "Yemen, Vol. 2," Box 161, Country File, NSF, LBJL.

106. Walt Rostow, "Agenda for Meeting with the President," 18 July 1967, "Rostow Memos (1 of 2)," Box 7, Name File, NSF, LBJL. On the origins of the 303 Committee, see "Change in Name of Special Group 5412," National Security Action Memorandum 303, 2 June 1964, National Security Action Memoranda, Box 4, NSF, LBJL and Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), 554-56.

107. CIA Information Cable, 3 August 1967, "Saudi Arabia, Vol. 2," Box 155, Country File, NSF, LBJL.

Muhammad Ali Uthman—with whom U.S. officials in Yemen had been “able to deal most cordially” for over a year.¹⁰⁸

Sallal’s successors rechristened their regime “North Yemen” on 5 November 1967 and signalled their desire for better relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States by insisting that Nasser pull his troops out of the Arabian Peninsula as soon as possible. Yet even as the situation in North Yemen improved, British troops were fighting a losing battle next door in Aden against Marxist guerrillas, who proclaimed the People’s Republic of South Yemen on 29 November and established relations with the Soviet Union shortly thereafter. With America’s blessing, Saudi Arabia and North Yemen quickly joined forces against the pro-Soviet regime in South Yemen. By 1970, King Faisal was secretly channeling Saudi funds and weapons to the North Yemenis, who were waging a clandestine war against their southern rivals.¹⁰⁹ The CIA became directly involved in this covert operation during the late 1970s, agency sources told Bob Woodward several years later, after King Khalid, Faisal’s successor, pressed the Carter administration to undertake “a limited paramilitary support program to undermine the Soviet-supported Marxist state of South Yemen.” The CIA continued to work hard “in conjunction with Saudi intelligence” to destabilize South Yemen during the early Reagan years. But in March 1982 the South Yemenis captured and tortured a team of thirteen American-trained saboteurs, who revealed the CIA’s involvement and forced the agency to scuttle the operation.¹¹⁰

Despite the fiasco in South Yemen, the United States and Saudi Arabia continued to work closely together a thousand miles to the northeast in Afghanistan, where the CIA was running one of its most successful and least secret operations ever. Covert action against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul was first proposed in March 1979 by CIA officials who thought that with just a little outside help, anticommunist Afghan insurgents would triumph. According to former CIA director Robert Gates, so did Saudi intelligence, which “had raised the prospect of a Soviet setback in Afghanistan” and was “considering officially proposing that the United States aid the rebels.” Moreover, Pakistani president Muhammad Zia al-Haq, whose nation shared a long and porous border with Afghanistan, was eager to put his Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) to work running guns to Muslim guerrillas next door.¹¹¹

108. Situation Room to LBJ, 5 November 1967, “Yemen, Vol. 2,” Box 161, Country File, NSF, LBJL. On U.S. ties with Iryani, Numan, and Uthman, see Chargé Harlan Clark (Taiz) to DOS, 27 July 1966, *ibid*.

109. Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 127–33.

110. Woodward, *Veil*, 78, 215.

111. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, 1996), 143–44. For an inside account of the ISI’s relationship with the CIA during the Afghan war, see Mohammad Yousaf, with Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (London, 1992), 78–112.

The rationale for the proposed Afghan operation seemed obvious to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and other hard-liners inside the Carter administration. In late March, Brzezinski expressed “concern over the Soviets’ creeping intervention in Afghanistan” and insisted that Washington must be “more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country’s independence.”¹¹² With détente gradually eroding because of recent Soviet adventures in Ethiopia and Angola, the Pentagon’s Walter Slocombe wondered whether covert U.S. support for the Afghan rebels might succeed in “sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire.”¹¹³ On 6 April 1979, the Special Coordination Committee (SCC), an interagency group that oversaw covert operations during the Carter years, instructed the CIA to develop a comprehensive plan for an American-backed secret war in Afghanistan ranging from “indirect financial assistance to the insurgents” to “weapons support.” Three months later, President Carter signed a finding authorizing the agency to begin helping the Afghan mujahadeen, as the Muslim rebels now called themselves, with propaganda, cash, and nonmilitary supplies. By the time that Russian troops rolled into Kabul on Christmas Eve, pressure was mounting from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to step up covert support for the mujahadeen.¹¹⁴

Over the course of the following decade, the Carter and Reagan administrations would use the CIA to funnel nearly \$3 billion into Afghanistan to help the Muslim resistance fight pro-Soviet president Babrak Karmal, his like-minded successor Mohammad Najibullah, and a hundred-thousand-man Russian expeditionary force. By July 1980, Washington was providing the mujahadeen with everything from captured Soviet AK-47 assault rifles to Chinese rocket-propelled grenade launchers via a covert arms pipeline running through Peshawar, a Pakistani frontier town near the Khyber Pass. After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan became a hot-button campaign issue later that fall for Republicans determined to make Jimmy Carter a one-term president, CIA director Stansfield Turner let it be known that his agency “was pushing everything through the pipeline that the Pakistanis were willing to receive.”¹¹⁵

Early in Ronald Reagan’s first term, William Casey, Turner’s successor as director of central intelligence, visited Tunisia, Somalia, Sudan, Oman, and Pakistan, where Mohammed Zia emphasized the importance of redoubling covert assistance to the Afghan mujahadeen. Casey returned from his tour of the Muslim world in April 1982 convinced that radical regimes from Libya to South

112. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York, 1983), 426–27.

113. Slocombe quoted in Gates, *From the Shadows*, 144–45.

114. Gates, *From the Shadows*, 145–47. On the origins of the SCC, see Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 59–62.

115. Gates, *From the Shadows*, 147–49. For an first-hand account of activities in Peshawar during early 1980, see Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 449.

Yemen and from Ethiopia to Afghanistan were “all working together or under Soviet influence” so that they “almost completely surround our friends Egypt and Israel and the oil fields of the Middle East.” Unless the United States was prepared to throw in the towel and concede the third world to the Soviet Union, Casey told President Reagan, the CIA must be authorized to expand “low-profile” paramilitary support for “widely scattered hit and run forces” like those fighting the Red Army in Afghanistan.¹¹⁶

With Reagan’s approval, Casey and other high-ranking U.S. officials devised increasingly ingenious ways to provide funds, weapons, and advice to the Afghan guerrillas. In late 1982, for example, Deputy National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane asked the House of Saud to help finance the mujahadeen’s war against the Soviets. “The Saudis understood that our interests in rolling back Marxism coincided closely with their own,” McFarlane noted long afterward, and over time they too would channel almost \$3 billion into the CIA’s covert crusade in Afghanistan.¹¹⁷ As the decade wore on, the Soviets and their Afghan clients realized that they were fighting a losing battle against the CIA and the mujahadeen. By 1986, Casey’s agency had infiltrated sixty U.S. Green Berets into Afghanistan, where they coordinated the flow of supplies to a guerrilla army whose ranks had swelled to thirty thousand and taught the rebels how to use high-tech weapons like shoulder-launched Stinger antiaircraft missiles that made sitting ducks out of Soviet helicopter gunships. Once the Red Army pulled out three years later, President Najibullah’s pro-Soviet regime quickly disintegrated. The fall of Kabul to mujahadeen forces in April 1992 marked the end of America’s longest and most expensive covert action. “It was the CIA’s war,” Charles Cogan, the former chief of the agency’s Middle Eastern division, observed shortly afterward. “There were no American military forces involved and no American soldiers killed.”¹¹⁸ During the early 1990s, Cogan and his colleagues downplayed the war’s length and cost and highlighted its role in triggering the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending the Cold War. The revelation that some of the Taliban rebels who seized power in Kabul in 1996 and some of the al-Qaeda leaders who planned the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 had learned their craft while helping the CIA defeat the Red Army in

116. Casey to Reagan, n.d. (April 1982), quoted in Gates, *From the Shadows*, 250–51. Among the Middle Eastern leaders most interested in America’s “low-profile” attempt to contain Islamic extremists was Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. By the mid-1980s, the CIA’s working relationship with Anwar Sadat’s successor was almost as close as the one that the agency had maintained with America’s favorite Arab himself before his assassination. See Woodward, *Veil*, 269.

117. McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 69. On Saudi financial assistance to the mujahadeen, see Mary Anne Weaver, “Letter from Pakistan: Children of the Jihad,” *New Yorker* 12 June 1995, 41.

118. Charles G. Cogan, “Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979,” *World Policy Journal* 10, no. 2 (summer 1993): 76–79. For a more recent account of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, see George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York, 2003).

Afghanistan, however, made the agency's most successful covert operation ring hollow in many ears.¹¹⁹

If the 1980s witnessed the CIA's greatest covert success in Afghanistan, that decade also witnessed the agency's greatest covert failure since the Bay of Pigs—the Iran-Contra affair, an embarrassing fiasco that stretched from Beirut through Tehran to Managua. There were few places that the CIA had worked longer or harder to help America's friends than the tiny republic of Lebanon, where since the late 1950s the agency had provided covert support for pro-Western forces. As early as 1957, the agency had delivered suitcases full of cash to Lebanese president Camille Chamoun, a pro-American Christian who used the money to defeat his anti-American Muslim rivals at the polls.¹²⁰ The CIA might have been able to fix elections, but it could not alter demographic trends that over the course of the next two decades would tilt the balance of power away from Lebanon's Christian minority and toward a Muslim majority whose ranks were swelled by thousands of Palestinian refugees from Jordan. Nor could U.S. intelligence prevent this religious animosity from sparking a bloody civil war in 1975 that would eventually claim nearly half a million Lebanese and Palestinian lives.¹²¹

The CIA did, however, seek to influence the outcome of that civil war by cultivating close ties with Bashir Gemayel, a ruthless Christian warlord whose right-wing Phalange party operated the largest and best armed private militia in Lebanon. The agency evidently placed Gemayel on its payroll during the early 1970s, while he was working for a Washington law firm, then stepped up its payments after he returned to Beirut, where he emerged as the most vehement Christian advocate of a "New Lebanon" purged of all Palestinian and PLO influence. Hoping to nudge Lebanon's Christians toward closer ties with Israel, President Reagan secretly approved a \$10 million CIA subsidy for Gemayel's Phalangist militia in late 1981. After the Israelis invaded Lebanon the following June, Gemayel helped them destroy the PLO infrastructure and was elected president by a Christian-dominated Lebanese parliament on 23 August 1982. Delighted by this turn of events, the Reagan administration secretly authorized the CIA to provide Lebanon's president-elect with covert funds to upgrade his intelligence and security apparatus. Before Bashir Gemayel

119. See Tim Weiner, "Blowback from the Afghan Battlefield," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 March 1994, 52–55; Mary Anne Weaver, "Blowback," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1996: 24–36; and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, 2004), 87, 162–63, 287–88.

120. Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics* (New York, 1969), 226–27; Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 248. See also William Blum, *The CIA, a Forgotten History: US Global Interventions since World War Two* (London, 1986), 103–107.

121. For two brief readable accounts of the origins of the 1975 Lebanese civil war, see Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York, 1988), 13–18; and David C. Gordon, *Lebanon: The Fragmented Nation* (London, 1980), 234–60.

could assume office, however, a huge bomb ripped through his headquarters on 14 September, killing him and dozens of his followers.¹²²

Hoping to prevent violent anti-American extremism from becoming endemic among Lebanese Muslims, CIA director Casey sent his leading expert on Middle East terrorism, Robert Ames, a seasoned covert operator who had earlier managed to place two top PLO figures on the agency's payroll, to Lebanon in the spring of 1983. On 18 April, Ames and eight other CIA officials were among the seventeen Americans killed when a truck bomb destroyed the U.S. embassy in Beirut. The CIA quickly linked the explosion to Hizbollah, a shadowy band of Lebanese extremists backed by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, but could not prevent the terrorists from detonating a far deadlier truck bomb six months later that killed 241 U.S. marines stationed at the Beirut airport. Nor could the agency prevent Islamic Jihad, yet another Lebanese terrorist group bankrolled by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, from kidnapping Beirut station chief William Buckley in March 1984 and executing him a year later.¹²³

Frustrated by the series of debacles in Lebanon, the Reagan administration decided to fight fire with fire. With help from Saudi intelligence, the CIA spent \$3 million in early 1985 to train and equip a secret Lebanese counter-terrorist battalion, which detonated a car bomb outside the Beirut headquarters of Sheik Fadlollah, the leader of the Hizbollah, on 8 March. The sheik escaped unharmed, but eighty innocent bystanders died.¹²⁴ Three months later, when Islamic Jihad hijacked a TWA jetliner, murdering a U.S. sailor and taking fifty other Americans hostage for ten days, Washington decided to strike back at the terrorist group's chief sponsor in Libya. Sometime during the summer of 1985, President Reagan approved Operation TULIP, authorizing the CIA to help Libyan dissidents topple and, if necessary, assassinate Muammar Qaddafi. But TULIP never blossomed quite the way the agency hoped, and Islamic Jihad and Hizbollah stepped up their kidnappings in Beirut amidst a flurry of unfounded claims that their American hostages had worked for the CIA.¹²⁵

With seven U.S. citizens held hostage in Lebanon and with every indication that Muslim extremists intended to increase rather than decrease that number, President Reagan soon authorized the CIA to work with Israeli intelligence to launch America's most complex and ultimately its most embarrassing covert operation in the Middle East, the Iran-Contra affair. Over the years, the CIA had developed an excellent working relationship with Israel's chief foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad, sharing information about the PLO, coordinating efforts to shore up Jordan's King Hussein, and cooperating to bring Bashir

122. Woodward, *Veil*, 217–18.

123. Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 378–80; Woodward, *Veil*, 248.

124. Ronald Kessler, *Inside the CIA: Revealing the Secrets of the World's Most Powerful Spy Agency* (New York, 1992), 44; Bob Woodward, *Veil* (New York, 1987), 393–95.

125. John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York, 1991), 503–04; Woodward, *Veil*, 408–12; Stephen Engelberg, "Reagan Approval Reported on Plan to Weaken Libya," *New York Times*, 4 November 1985.

Gemayel to power in Lebanon.¹²⁶ On 3 July 1985, Robert McFarlane, Reagan's national security adviser, and David Kimche, a former Mossad operative who served as director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, sketched out a plan to free the Americans hostages in Lebanon. Two weeks later, McFarlane secured presidential approval for an Israeli-American arms-for-hostages scheme whose logic seemed simple. The U.S. hostages in Lebanon had been kidnapped by the pro-Iranian Hizbollah. Iran badly needed American T.O.W. antitank missiles to avoid losing its stalemated war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. And a victorious Saddam Hussein might well decide to make Israel his next target. Before the summer was out, the Pentagon delivered 504 T.O.W. missiles to Israel, which arranged to have them transferred in two installments to the Iranians, who in turn pressed Hizbollah to begin releasing the Americans it held captive in Beirut. On 15 September, Hizbollah obliged by freeing one hostage, Benjamin Weir, but refused to release its other U.S. prisoners, apparently because Israel failed to deliver the second installment of T.O.W.'s to Iran.¹²⁷

Undaunted by these complications, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, an NSC staff member who served as the chief White House expert on counterterrorism, came up with what he would subsequently call "a neat idea." If America and Israel could secretly arrange to sell Iran the military hardware it needed on a regular basis, there might be big dividends not only in Lebanon but halfway around the world in Central America, where CIA-trained counter-revolutionaries or "contras" were trying to topple the left-wing regime that had come to power in Nicaragua in 1979. By late 1985, the contras were running short of cash and weapons because the U.S. Congress had passed the Boland Amendment, which forced the Reagan administration to cease all direct American assistance for the CIA's Nicaraguan clients. To circumvent this law, Oliver North proposed laundering in Switzerland funds generated by arms sales to Iran and then passing the cash along to the contras.¹²⁸

Impressed by North's line of reasoning, in January 1986 President Reagan authorized the NSC and the CIA to launch "Operation Recovery," described for the record as an attempt to encourage unidentified pro-Western Iranian "moderates." Relying on a cast of shadowy intermediaries straight out of *Mission: Impossible*, Colonel North arranged for the Pentagon to provide the Israelis with up to four thousand T.O.W. missiles for sale to the Iranians, who would in turn press Hizbollah to release the American hostages in Lebanon.¹²⁹ Operation Recovery collapsed later that summer, however, after the Iranians discovered that the selling price of the T.O.W.'s they coveted for their war

126. On the close working relationship between the CIA and Israeli intelligence, see Cockburn and Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison*, 313–45.

127. The definitive account of these events remains Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, 1991), 129–46, 164–83.

128. Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 272–83. North's "neat idea" quote may be found on page 274.

129. Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 315–26; Prados, *Keepers of the Keys*, 505–517.

against Iraq had been tripled in order to generate profits to finance the CIA's covert war in Nicaragua. In October 1986, Tehran leaked the details to a Lebanese newspaper, revealing the hypocrisy of the Reagan administration's antiterrorist policy, exposing Oliver North's neat idea for funding the contras, and confirming Arab suspicions regarding the counterrevolutionary agenda of American and Israeli intelligence.¹³⁰

America's covert attempt to make new friends inside the ayatollah's Iran at the expense of the Kremlin's clients in Iraq came as no great surprise in Baghdad, where the Ba'ath Party was already quite familiar with the CIA. Nowhere has the story of American covert action in the Middle East since 1945 been shrouded in greater mystery than in Iraq, where for more than forty years the CIA fomented coups, stirred up restless Kurdish separatists, and, in the process, may have created its own Frankenstein's monster in Saddam Hussein. The CIA seems to have commenced its Iraqi operations in the wake of the bloody revolution of July 1958, an upheaval that Allen Dulles frankly admitted had caught both Iraq's late Prime Minister Nuri Said and U.S. intelligence by surprise.¹³¹ Just four days after Colonel Abdel Karim Qassim seized power in Baghdad, top U.S. and U.K. officials acknowledged that covert action would probably be a more effective antidote than military intervention. "The best way to handle the Iraqi situation," John Foster Dulles and Selwyn Lloyd concluded on 18 July, "was to wait and watch developments, building up assets within the country which might at some future time make it possible to bring about a change. The Mussadiq example could be quoted."¹³²

From late 1958 through mid-1960, Iraq seethed with rumors that Qassim would shortly be overthrown and perhaps even assassinated by anticommunist elements abetted by U.S. intelligence. As early as 3 December 1958, an unidentified Iraqi officer had secretly approached the U.S. embassy seeking funds for an anti-Qassim coup. The State Department instructed U.S. diplomats to distance themselves from the plotters, but when Iraqi counterintelligence uncovered the conspiracy a week later, President Qassim angrily charged that Americans were involved, despite Washington's protestations to the contrary.¹³³ When the White House learned early in the new year that an uprising by anti-communist officers in Mosul province was "scheduled between 2-5 March" and that the "plotters plan to assassinate Qasim," no one bothered to warn the president of Iraq.¹³⁴ Instead, after the Mosul revolt misfired and drove Qassim

130. Woodward, *Veil*, 481-503.

131. Allen Dulles testimony, 29 July 1958, in Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions*, 10: 644-45.

132. Dulles quoted in Foreign Office memcon, "Turkey and Iraq," 18 July 1958, vol. 133823, PRO FO371.

133. See *FRUS 1958-60*, 12: 355, note 1; 355 note 2; 357 note 2; and Gallman to DOS, tel. 11 December 1958, 357-58.

134. John Eisenhower to Ike, "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material," 28 February 1959, *FRUS 1958-60*, 12: 385, note 1.

further left, Eisenhower set up a top secret interagency task force on 3 April 1959 charged with developing covert means “to avoid a communist takeover in Iraq.”¹³⁵ A month later, the State Department flew Ambassador John Jernegan from Baghdad to Washington to address the principal question confronting the task force: “Is there any hope for this new Iraqi regime from our point of view, and shouldn’t we start gathering up our assets and seeing if we can’t get rid of it?”¹³⁶ By early June, however, a White House staffer confirmed that “preliminary contingency planning was going forward in Defense and CIA.”¹³⁷

Among the contingencies evidently under consideration at CIA headquarters by the end of the summer was the assassination of Abdel Karim Qassim. The few declassified documents currently available make it quite clear that the agency’s operatives in Baghdad were very well informed about “a forthcoming attempt to assassinate Kassem” in early October. While it is doubtful that the CIA actually encouraged young Saddam Hussein and his Ba’athist comrades to ambush Qassim’s limousine on a Baghdad sidestreet on 7 October, few in Washington would have been unhappy if the assassins had succeeded. Indeed, two months later, while Qassim recuperated from his wounds in a military hospital, Richard Bissell, the CIA’s deputy director for operations, told the National Security Council that “there was a better than even chance that another attempt would be made to assassinate Kassem.”¹³⁸

Bissell knew the odds far better than most. He oversaw the CIA’s newly created “Health Alteration Committee,” which by early 1960 was developing a plan to “incapacitate” Qassim and prevent him from “promoting Soviet bloc political interests in Iraq.” In a bizarre scheme better suited for an episode of *Mission: Impossible*, the agency intended to send Qassim a monogrammed handkerchief laced with a disabling pathogen. “We do not consciously seek subject’s permanent removal from the scene,” a top CIA official observed on 25 February, but “we also do not object should this complication develop.” Although Bissell approved the plan on 1 April 1960, Qassim’s poisoned present was evidently lost in the mail. Fifteen years later, however, CIA officials smugly informed Senate investigators that Qassim had “suffered a terminal illness before a firing squad in Baghdad (an event we had nothing to do with) not very long after our handkerchief proposal was considered.”¹³⁹

Such self-serving denials notwithstanding, the CIA actually appears to have had a great deal to do with the bloody Ba’athist coup that toppled Qassim in February 1963. Deeply troubled by Qassim’s steady drift to the left, by his threats to invade Kuwait, and by his attempt to cancel Western oil concessions,

135. Gordon Gray to Herter, 3 April 1959, *FRUS 1958-60*, 12: 410.

136. Jernegan Oral History Interview, JFKL.

137. Memo by Phillip Halle, 8 June 1959, *FRUS 1958-60*, 12: 466-69.

138. Bissell quoted in the minutes of the 428th NSC meeting, 10 December 1959, *FRUS 1955-57*, 12: 494-95.

139. CIA officials quoted in Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots*, 181, n. 1.

U.S. intelligence made contact with anticommunist Ba'ath activists both inside and outside the Iraqi army during the early 1960s. According to Peter and Marian Farouk-Sluglett, among the Ba'ath party figures working with the CIA by 1963 was twenty-six year-old Saddam Hussein, who had fled to Cairo following his unsuccessful attempt to kill Qassim three years earlier. On the morning on 8 February 1963, Ba'athist officers and troops moved into Baghdad, surrounded the presidential palace, and demanded that its occupant surrender at once. Qassim refused and urged loyal units of the Iraqi army and lightly armed Communist militias to resist the Ba'athist takeover. Three days of carnage ensued, during which Qassim and thousands of his left-wing followers were captured and executed by Ba'athist death squads.¹⁴⁰

Almost all published accounts of the 1963 coup and its gruesome aftermath indicate that the Ba'athists relied on carefully prepared lists to identify their victims. A number of these accounts claim that those lists were provided by the CIA, which saw an opportunity to liquidate the Iraqi Communists. Given the agency's preoccupation with preventing further Soviet inroads in the Arab world, such accounts seem quite plausible. As Ba'ath Party secretary general Ali Saleh Sa'adi put it long afterward, "we came to power on a CIA train." Not surprisingly, few in Washington were surprised by Qassim's fall, and fewer still mourned his passing. "We really had the T's crossed on what was happening," James Critchfield, who headed the CIA's Middle East division in 1963, recalled many years later. "We regarded it as a great victory."¹⁴¹ The significance of that victory soon became obvious when the new Ba'athist regime began "ousting all Communist instructors and technicians that infiltrated the Iraqi armed forces under Kassem" and then "put out feelers for Western aid."¹⁴² Unable to ship military hardware to Iraq openly without offending Israeli sensibilities, the Kennedy administration apparently instructed the CIA secretly to fly several unmarked U.S. air force transports laden with tanks, guns, and ammunition from Dover, Delaware to an isolated air base outside Baghdad in August 1963. According to the CIA's Bruce Odell, the agency also sent a covert advisory team into Iraq during the autumn of 1963 to ensure that the Ba'athists made effective use of their new American weapons.¹⁴³

Despite covert help and encouragement from the CIA, Qassim's successors were themselves ousted in November 1963 by pro-Nasser officers who ushered in a series of increasingly unstable military regimes punctuated in July 1968 by a second Ba'athist takeover led by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and masterminded by his nephew, Saddam Hussein. Unlike the first Ba'athist seizure of power in 1963,

140. Marion Farouk Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (New York, 1987), 283, n. 3.

141. Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein*, (New York, 1999), 74.

142. Burris to LBJ, 13 March 1963, "Memos to VP from Col. Burris, 7/62-4/63," Box 6, Vice Presidential Security File, LBJL.

143. *Boston Globe*, 25 October 1976, 1.

this latest coup surprised and worried top U.S. officials, who watched Saddam Hussein embrace pro-Soviet policies abroad while building a brutal police state at home. Throughout the 1970s, first as Iraq's vice president and then as president in his own right after deposing Bakr in a palace coup, Saddam openly sought the Kremlin's help in destroying two of America's closest allies in the region, Israel and the shah of Iran. When the shah turned to Washington for assistance in 1972, the Nixon administration authorized the CIA to fund and equip Kurdish guerrillas who were already waging a hit-and-run campaign in northern Iraq against the Ba'athist regime with help from Iran's SAVAK. The CIA's secret war in Iraqi Kurdistan would be overseen by the 40 Committee, created by President Nixon in February 1970 to replace LBJ's 303 Committee and chaired by White House national security adviser Henry Kissinger.¹⁴⁴

The first covert U.S. contacts with the Kurds, a stateless people whose mountainous homeland straddles the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, long predated the establishment of the 40 Committee. As early as 1945, OSS operatives stationed in Baghdad had made forays into Kurdistan, where they discussed national self-determination with Mustafa Barzani, whose Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) was simultaneously seeking Soviet support for his people's independence.¹⁴⁵ On 11 September 1961, the *Peshmerga*, a twenty-thousand-man guerrilla army organized by Barzani's KDP, launched a Kurdish war of national liberation that during the next year and a half helped undermine support for the Qassim regime.¹⁴⁶ When Qassim's Ba'athist successors proved equally unsympathetic to Kurdish self-determination, Barzani sought help abroad, first from Russia and then from America.¹⁴⁷ As the political infighting among left-wing officers in Baghdad deepened, Barzani warned Washington in early 1968 that "the Kurds are the only unified force which can save Iraq" and pleaded for American arms, food, and medical supplies. But top U.S. officials ignored Barzani's appeal. "Our hands are tied unless we want to begin clandestine aid to the Kurds," White House Middle East expert Harold Saunders explained on 13 March, "and we haven't so far seen much to be gained from that."¹⁴⁸

Four years later, however, American policymakers believed they could gain a great deal from covert support for the Iraqi Kurds. Cold-shouldered by the

144. National Security Decision Memorandum 40, "Responsibility for the Conduct, Supervision and Coordination of Covert Action Operations," 17 February 1970, *Documents of the National Security Council*, reel 5. On the origins of the 40 Committee, see Prados, *Keepers of the Keys*, 318–20. On Nixon, the shah, and the Kurds, see Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, 204–08.

145. Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing*, 253–65.

146. On the background to the 1961 *Peshmerga* uprising, see Ismet Sheriff Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," in *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand (New York, 1993), 144–51.

147. On Kurdish ties with the Soviets, see Robert Komer memcon, 28 May 1963, "Staff Memos: Komer 3/63-5/63," Box 322, Meetings and Memoranda, NSF, JFKL.

148. "The Kurdish Question in Iraq," attached to John W. Foster memcon, 12 March 1968; Saunders memcon, 13 March 1968, "Iraq, Vol. 1," Box 138, Country File, NSF, LBJL.

Johnson administration, Mustafa Barzani initiated secret talks with Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, who agreed on 11 March 1970 to grant limited autonomy to Kurdistan. Having struck a deal with Barzani and the *Peshmerga*, the Iraqi leaders stepped up pressure on the shah of Iran to make territorial concessions along the Shatt al-Arab, the narrow waterway that provided Iraq's only outlet to the Persian Gulf, and snubbed the United States by signing a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union on 9 April 1972. When Nixon and Kissinger stopped off in Tehran six weeks later on their way home from a summit meeting in Moscow, the shah asked for U.S. help in rekindling the Kurdish rebellion against the pro-Soviet regime in Baghdad. Happy to oblige, the Nixon administration authorized the CIA to funnel thousands of captured Soviet weapons and \$16 million in cash to the *Peshmerga*, which by late 1972 had resumed its guerrilla crusade for Kurdish independence.¹⁴⁹

Neither the United States nor Iran, however, regarded the Kurdish uprising as anything more than a spoiling operation. Indeed, once Saddam Hussein and the shah signed an accord on 6 March 1975 settling their dispute on terms favorable to Iran, Kissinger's 40 Committee cut off covert aid to the Kurds, leaving the *Peshmerga* guerrillas and their families to fend for themselves. After Saddam sent Iraqi troops into Kurdistan a few days later to liquidate the rebellion and its leaders, Mustafa Barzani appealed urgently for American intervention. "The United States has a moral and political responsibility," the Kurdish leader informed Henry Kissinger, "toward our people who have committed themselves to your country's policy." Nixon's new secretary of state was unmoved. Later that year, while three hundred thousand cold and hungry Iraqi Kurds huddled in makeshift camps just across the border in Iran, Kissinger shrugged off the whole affair by telling congressional investigators that "covert action should not be confused with missionary work."¹⁵⁰

Far more cynical and far more ruthless than Henry Kissinger, Saddam Hussein never expressed any confusion about such matters, nor did he harbor any illusions about the real American attitude toward his regime. He welcomed the modest amounts of American assistance Iraq received in late 1980 during the first months of his war with the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, but was hardly surprised to learn that the Israeli pilots who bombed the Osirak reactor outside Baghdad in June 1981 had been guided to their target via satellite imagery provided by U.S. intelligence. Nor could Saddam have been startled by the revelation that at the same time that the U.S. Department of Agriculture was selling him surplus grain, the CIA was delivering T.O.W. missiles to the Iranians for

149. John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *No Friends But the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds* (New York, 1992) 128–35.

150. On Kissinger and the Kurds, see Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 313–15 (the quote is on page 315). See also Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," 165–73; and Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends But the Mountains*, 136–41.

use against his tanks.¹⁵¹ Unimpressed by America's latest covert capers in the Middle East, Saddam Hussein overtly sent his army into Kuwait in August 1990. Intimately familiar with thirty years of clandestine U.S. meddling in Iraq, he may well have believed that Washington's commitments to the Kuwaitis ran no deeper than those to the Kurds.

Having served a brief stint as CIA director during the Ford administration, George Bush reacted instinctively to the Iraqi invasion by asking the agency to engineer a clandestine quick fix. According to Bob Woodward, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft argued as early as 3 August "that Saddam had to be toppled . . . covertly through the CIA." The president evidently agreed, for he swiftly ordered the agency "to begin planning for a covert operation that would destabilize the regime and, he hoped, remove Saddam from power." Ten days later, "Bush signed a top secret intelligence 'finding' authorizing CIA covert actions to overthrow Saddam." Woodward reports that the agency "was not to violate the ban on involvement in assassination attempts, but rather [to] recruit Iraqi dissidents to remove Saddam." Whatever clandestine schemes the CIA may have hatched during late 1990 and early 1991, however, proved ineffective against the Ba'athist police state in Baghdad, and it would take overt American military intervention to force the Iraqi strongman out of Kuwait.¹⁵²

In the days immediately after the Gulf War ended, American intelligence operatives inside Iraq encouraged Shi'ite and Kurdish dissidents to launch an uprising to finish off Saddam Hussein. After the Iraqi army and secret police crushed the rebels in March 1991, the Bush administration shifted its focus to fomenting a military coup. "I frankly wished [that the March rebellion] hadn't happened," Brent Scowcroft told ABC News six years later. "We clearly would have preferred a coup" against Saddam Hussein, Scowcroft added, because "it's the colonel with the brigade, patrolling his palace, that's going to get him." Despite spending millions on "Black Radio" and other propaganda aimed at identifying just such a colonel and despite nearly five years of secret meetings in London, Washington, and Amman with exiled Iraqi officers known loosely as "The Accord," the CIA never managed to orchestrate a coup in Baghdad. Instead, Iraqi intelligence penetrated the operation, and in June 1996 Saddam Hussein announced the arrest of eight hundred officers suspected of disloyalty, thirty of whom were secretly executed.¹⁵³

While this latest covert fiasco was being played out on three continents, Washington turned once again to the Kurds, as it had two decades earlier. Sup-

151. On CIA intelligence sharing with Israel on the eve of the Orisak raid, see Cockburn and Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison*, 323–24. On Saddam's ambivalent relationship with the United States during the mid-1980s, see Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York, 1994), 42–59.

152. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York, 1992), 237, 282.

153. For Scowcroft's comments and details of the abortive military coup, see ABC News, *Unfinished Business: The CIA and Saddam Hussein* (first broadcast on 26 June 1997).

ported by \$4 million in cash from the United States, Kurdish leaders helped found the Iraqi National Congress (INC), a broad coalition opposed to Saddam Hussein, in the summer of 1992. Early in the new year, President Bill Clinton signed yet another intelligence finding authorizing the CIA to mount yet another effort to destabilize the Ba'athist dictatorship, this time relying on the newly created INC, which was headquartered at Arbil, the informal Kurdish capital. According to Warren Marik and Robert Baer, two veteran CIA case officers stationed in northern Iraq who worked closely with Kurdish guerrillas and other Iraqi dissidents during the mid-1990s, Washington sent fifty Americans and spent nearly \$100 million to spark an anti-Saddam uprising that misfired in March 1995. Marik blamed infighting among the Kurds. Baer, on the other hand, claimed that the Clinton White House got cold feet at the eleventh hour and backed out, which seemed to "doom forever any chance we'd have to get rid of Saddam."¹⁵⁴ Eighteen months after Clinton cut bait, one of the Kurdish factions decided to settle an old score with its rivals by inviting the Iraqi army into Arbil. After several days of bloody street fighting in August 1996, Saddam Hussein's troops killed or captured 150 INC leaders. The CIA spirited another six hundred out of Arbil and eventually into exile in the United States.¹⁵⁵ With Saddam Hussein still firmly entrenched in Baghdad, the moral of the story seemed obvious to Clinton's former CIA director. "You cannot rely with any degree of confidence on covert action to remove the head of a country, even a very despicable tyrant," John Deutch told ABC News in early 1997.¹⁵⁶

John Deutch would have done well to heed his own advice, as would the presidents, national security advisers, and intelligence experts who had enthusiastically embraced the cult of covert action during the preceding half century. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt asked Wild Bill Donovan to establish the OSS in 1941, America's leaders have consistently assumed that plausibly deniable clandestine operations constitute a quick and cheap way to protect U.S. interests and to promote U.S. objectives in the Middle East without running the risk of lengthy and costly military intervention. From the moment that Harry Truman signed NSC 10/2 in June 1948 to the winter morning that Richard Nixon established the 40 Committee twenty-two years later, CIA operatives fixed elections, planned coups, fomented uprisings, and even plotted assassinations to punish enemies and reward friends from Cairo to Tehran and from Baghdad to Beirut. Some covert operations, like the agency's ham-handed attempts to topple anti-American governments in Syria and South Yemen, back-

154. "How CIA's Secret War on Saddam Hussein Collapsed," *Washington Post*, 26 June 1997; Robert Baer, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (New York, 2002), 171–213. Baer's quote is on p. 174.

155. "For 3rd Time in 21 Years, Saddam Hussein's Foes Pay Price for a Foiled U.S. Plot," *New York Times*, 11 September 1996; Evan Thomas et al., "Bay of Pigs Redux," *Newsweek*, 23 March 1998, 36–44.

156. For Deutch's comments, see ABC News, *Unfinished Business: The CIA and Saddam Hussein*.

fired before they ever really got started. Others, like Operation Ajax in Iran and the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan, helped America's friends in the short run but played into the hands of America's enemies over the longer haul.

Despite such lessons from the past, some in Washington have continued to hope that CIA covert action might make overt military intervention unnecessary. With the passage of the Iraqi Liberation Act of October 1998, Congress authorized the agency "to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power" and earmarked \$97 million to fund his Iraqi foes. Bill Clinton and many Democrats on Capitol Hill were ambivalent about this legislation, as were Republican senior statesmen like Henry Kissinger, who cautioned that too much reliance on the CIA would mean that "we will repeat the debacle of the Bay of Pigs and of northern Iraq in 1975 and 1996." Neoconservative action intellectuals like Paul Wolfowitz, however, dismissed the Bay of Pigs analogy on 25 November 1998 as a "particularly weak argument" favored by knee-jerk critics of covert action who were too pusillanimous to stand up to a "war criminal" like Saddam Hussein. That same day, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-born Middle East expert who would eventually join Wolfowitz inside the administration of George W. Bush, told listeners of PBS Newshour that because "Saddam Hussein poses a threat to international peace and stability," the United States must "embrace this objective of getting rid of him."¹⁵⁷

Five years later, Wolfowitz and Khalilzad were among the most strident proponents of preemptive war in Iraq after rumors that pro-American dissidents in Baghdad would depose Saddam Hussein at the last minute proved unfounded. Notwithstanding the exploits of Peter Graves and the cast of *Mission: Impossible*, the latest CIA machinations in Iraq merely confirm that U.S. efforts to achieve clandestine quick fixes in the Muslim world have seldom been successful. In the words of the agency's former director, John Deutch: "No one should believe that covert action is a silver bullet."¹⁵⁸ Despite his own well-developed Lone Ranges instincts, George W. Bush would rely on a much more potent bullet in America's arsenal—old-fashioned military intervention—to achieve regime change in Iraq in March 2003. Ironically, the Arab "Young Ambassadors" whom I met the following August took little comfort from the knowledge that Operation Iraqi Freedom was not a CIA plot. Indeed, were our paths to cross again today, they would almost certainly ask me whether I had heard that Ayad Allani, Iraq's first post-Saddam Prime Minister, had been on the agency's payroll during the early 1990s.¹⁵⁹

157. On Clinton, Kissinger, and the Iraqi Liberation Act, see David Isenberg, "Imperial Overstretch: Washington's Dubious Strategy to Overthrow Saddam Hussein," *Policy Analysis* (17 November 1999), 4–5. On the neoconservatives, see Paul Wolfowitz, "Bring Down Saddam," *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 November 1998, and Zalmay Khalilzad's remarks on PBS Newshour, 28 Nov. 1998, at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/july-decc98/iraq_11-25.html.

158. For Deutch's comments, see ABC News, *Unfinished Business: The CIA and Saddam Hussein*.

159. "Ex-CIA Aides Say Iraqi Leader Helped Agency in 90's," *New York Times*, 9 June 2004.